



AM

45

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Charles Diehl



BYZANTINE
PORTRAITS



Translated by

HAROLD BELL



New York · MCMXXVII

ALFRED · A · KNOFF

COPYRIGHT 1927, BY ALFRED A. KNOPE, INC.

Originally issued as
Figures byzantines
Paris: Armand Colin, 1906

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
THE HAPPY MEMORY OF
HOWARD CROSBY BUTLER
THIS TRANSLATION IS
AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------------------------|
| I. THE LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS | 3 |
| II. ATHENAIS | 24 |
| III. THEODORA | 49 |
| IV. IRENE | 73 |
| V. A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN OF THE EIGHTH CENTURY | 105 |
| VI. THE BLESSED THEODORA | 125 |
| VII. THE ROMANTIC ADVENTURES OF BASIL THE MACEDONIAN | 148 |
| VIII. THE FOUR MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE | 172 |
| IX. THEOPHANO | 206 |
| X. ZOË PORPHYROGENITA | 231 |
| XI. A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY OF THE ELEVENTH CENTURY | 276 |
| XII. ANNA DALASSENA: A NOBLE FAMILY OF THE ELEVENTH CENTURY | 300 |
| XIII. THE WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS | 326 |
| THE SACRED PALACE | |
| KEY TO PLAN | 341 |
| PLAN | <i>in rear cover pocket</i> |

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

I

THE LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

I

IN the most secluded part of the Imperial Palace of Byzantium, far beyond the guard-rooms and the apartments of state, in the midst of shadowy gardens and running waters, which, to quote a contemporary chronicler, made of it "a new Eden", "another Paradise", arose the private dwelling of the Greek Emperors of the Middle Ages.

From the descriptions of Byzantine historians we can still obtain some idea of the exquisite, splendid abode which many generations of Princes had embellished from age to age, and where, far from the noise of the world, and the tedium of ceremonial, the *Basileis*, representatives of God on earth, were able from time to time to become men for a space. Precious marbles and glittering mosaics abounded. In the great saloon of the New Palace, constructed by Basil I, above the magnificent colonnade of green marble alternating with red onyx, were vast compositions, monuments of that secular art, which the Byzantine masters practised far more commonly than one imagines, representing the sovereign enthroned among his victorious generals, and unfolding the glorious epic of his reign: "the Herculean labours of the Basileus", as a contemporary chronicler has it, "his solicitude for his

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

subjects, his deeds on the battlefield, and his God-awarded victories." But above all, the imperial bed-chamber must, it seems, have been a marvel. Below the high ceiling, studded with golden stars, in the midst of which, in green mosaic, was a cross, the symbol of salvation, the whole of the vast chamber was magnificently decorated. In the mosaic floor a central medallion enclosed a peacock with spreading plumage, and in the corner were four eagles, the imperial bird, framed in green marble, with wings outstretched ready to take their flight. On the lower part of the walls, the mosaic made, as it were, a border of flowers. Higher up, against a background of glowing gold, still other mosaics represented the entire imperial family in state costume: Basil crowned and seated on his throne, near him his wife Eudocia, and grouped around them, very much as they may be seen in the faded miniatures of a fine manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale, their sons and daughters, holding books on which were written pious verses from the Scriptures. They all raised their hands solemnly towards the redeeming cross; and long inscriptions carved on the walls invoked upon the dynasty God's blessing and the assurance of eternal life.

The Pavilion of the Pearl, with its golden vault upheld by four columns of marble and its mosaic wainscot with hunting scenes, contained the summer bedchamber of the sovereigns, and opened through porticoes on two of its sides upon cool gardens. There was the winter bedchamber in the Carian Pavilion, so called from being constructed throughout of Carian marble, protected from the violent winds that blew from the Sea of Marmora; there was the Empress's

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

wardrobe, wainscotted in the white marble of Proconnesus, and covered with pictures of the saints. And, finest of all, there was the bedchamber of the Empress, a wonderful room whose marble pavement seemed like "a meadow of enamelled flowers", the walls of which, lined with porphyry, Thessalian breccia, and white Carian, were such rare and happy combinations of colour that it was known as the Pavilion of Harmony. There was the Pavilion of Love also, and that of the Purple, wherein, according to custom and tradition, the imperial children must be born, and from which they derived their title of Porphyrogenitus. And everywhere was the splendour of silver and ivory doors, purple curtains sliding on rods of silver, tapestries embroidered in gold with fantastic animals, great golden lamps swinging from the domes, precious furniture wonderfully incrustated with mother of pearl, ivory, and gold.

It was in this marvellous Palace, in the midst of her court of eunuchs and women, far from the tedium of ceremonies, far from the tumults of the capital, in the quiet peacefulness of flowery gardens, amid the clear sparkle of fountains, that she lived whose life I shall attempt to describe in the following pages; "the Glory of the Purple, the Joy of the World", as the people of Constantinople hailed her; "the Most Pious and Most Happy Augusta, the Christ-loving Basilissa", as she was officially styled — in short, the Empress of Byzantium.

II

One is apt to form a rather false notion of the life of these Greek Empresses of the East. By an uncon-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

scious association of ideas — the life of women in ancient Greece, in mediaeval Russia, in the Moham-medan Orient — one is too ready to assume that the Byzantine Empresses were perpetual recluses, carefully cloistered in the Gynaecium and guarded by armed eunuchs; seeing none but women, “beardless men”, as eunuchs were called in Byzantium, and old priests; appearing in public only on very rare occasions, and even then closely veiled from the public eye. One is apt to imagine them reigning over a court of women carefully separated from that of the Basileus—living, in short, a harem life in a Christian world.

This notion, though widespread, is very questionable. Under few governments have women had a better position, or played a more important part, or had a greater influence upon politics and government, than under the Byzantine Empire. It is, as has been justly remarked, “one of the most striking characteristics of Greek history in the Middle Ages.”¹ Not merely did many of these Empresses dominate their husbands by their beauty, or by their superior intelligence; that alone would prove little, and harem favourites have done as much. But under the monarchy founded by Constantine, in almost every century of its history, one meets with women who either have reigned themselves or, more frequently, have with sovereign power disposed of the crown and made Emperors. And these Princesses lacked neither the outward and visible signs of authority, nor the substance of it. We find evidence of this legitimately-wielded power not only in the life of the Gynaecium,

¹ A. N. Rambaud, “Impératrices d’Orient” (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1891, tome i, p. 829).

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

but even more definitely in public affairs, in which its legality is expressly admitted by contemporaries. And therefore those who wish to know and understand the society and civilisation of Byzantium must learn some unexpected things about the life of these forgotten Princesses of long ago.

III

Throughout the vast extent of the Imperial Gynaecium the Empress reigned supreme. Besides her women, she too, like the Emperor, had a numerous retinue of palace officials. At the head of her household was a Praepositus, or Lord Chamberlain, in supreme command of all the chamberlains, referendaries, ushers, and silentiaries, attached to the service of the Basilissa, all, together with the halberdiers, or protospatharii, of her body-guard, carefully chosen from among the eunuchs of the Palace. To serve her at table the Empress, as well as the Emperor, had a Grand Master and a Chief Taster. At the head of her women was a Grand Mistress of the Palace, on whom was generally bestowed the high dignity of Patrician of the Girdle, and who, with the Protoves-tiarius, managed the innumerable throng of maids of honour, ladies of the bedchamber, and ladies-in-waiting. As a rule, the Emperor appointed those who were to serve the Augusta, and he especially reserved to himself the privilege of personally investing the Grand Mistress with the insignia of her office, as well as that of receiving the homage of newly appointed maids of honour. But for the majority of her attendants the Empress held a special investiture in order to emphasise the fact that they were in her service.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

And although, on the day of their installation, when assuming their official robes — golden tunic, white mantle, and high, tower-like head-dress (the *propoloma*) with long white veil —, the women of the Basilissa were admonished by the Praepositus to fear God and be sincerely faithful and wholly devoted to the Basileus and the Augusta, there is reason to believe that, once admitted to the imperial chamber, they soon forgot the Emperor in their loyalty to the Empress.

Since she could rely upon the fidelity of her servants, the Empress was free to act as she chose within the Gynaecium, and she used this freedom in accordance with her character and temperament. For many of these fair Princesses their toilet was one of their chief occupations. It is said that Theodora, accomplished coquette as she was, took great care of her beauty; she slept far into the morning so that her face might appear serene and lovely; she took frequent and prolonged baths in order to preserve the striking freshness of her complexion; she loved splendid robes of state, the dazzle of great purple-violet mantles embroidered in gold, the glittering jewels, and the precious stones and pearls; for she knew that her beauty was the best guarantee of her absolute power. Other princesses had simpler tastes; except in state ceremonies, Zoë wore only soft, light dresses, which were better suited to her fair beauty; but on the other hand, she was addicted to the use of perfumes and cosmetics, and in her apartments great fires were kept going summer and winter for the preparation of unguents and perfumes, so that they were rather like an alchemist's laboratory. And there were others who despised all such refinements of luxury, prefer-

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

ring, in the words of a contemporary, "to adorn themselves with the beauty of their virtues", and scorning as unworthy and futile "the cosmetic art beloved of Cleopatra."

Some, like Theodora, thought an exquisitely served table an inalienable privilege of supreme power; while others spent but little on themselves, and took delight in storing money away in great strong-boxes. Many were pious; devotional exercises, long vigils before the holy icons, and serious conversations with austere monks, took up much of an Empress's time. Many had a taste for books, and gathered about them a group of men of letters, who composed to their order works in prose and in verse, for which they were always well paid. Occasionally some of these Empresses, such as Athenais and Eudocia, condescended to authorship; and the princesses of the Comnenian dynasty in particular have the merited reputation of being well-educated, scholarly, and learned. Others took pleasure in buffoons and clowns: notwithstanding her intelligence, the great Theodora herself, with her native genius for acting, occasionally got up amusements in doubtful taste, often at the expense of her guests. And, finally, court intrigues and love-affairs occupied much of their time, and often even worried the Emperor.

It must not be supposed, however, that a Byzantine Empress divided all her hours between religion, the toilet, receptions, festivities, and holidays. Higher matters often engaged the attention of many of them, and more than once the government felt the power of the Gynaecium. The Augusta had her private fortune, which she managed as she chose without

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

consulting or even notifying the Basileus; she had her own political opinions, which were not infrequently at variance with those of the sovereign. It is even more surprising in such an autocracy to find that the Emperor gave the Basilissa complete liberty in certain respects, and often was quite ignorant of what went on in her part of the Palace. For the Gynaecium was the scene of strange and mysterious happenings. When Anthemius, Patriarch of Constantinople, was cited under strong suspicion of heresy to appear before the Council and was excommunicated by the Church and exiled by Justinian, it was in the Palace itself, in Theodora's apartments, that he found refuge. There was some astonishment at first at his sudden disappearance; he was thought to be dead, and finally was forgotten. Great, therefore, was the general amazement when, after the Empress's death, the Patriarch was discovered in the depths of the Gynaecium; he had lived twelve years in this safe retreat unknown to Justinian and (what is perhaps even more admirable) unbetrayed by Theodora. It was also in the Gynaecium that the plot was hatched to murder the Emperor Nicephorus Phocas. Without any suspicion on the part of the Basileus, Theophano was able to receive her accomplices, to introduce armed men into the women's quarters, and to hide them so well that when the Emperor, who had been warned at the last moment by an anonymous letter, sent to search the Gynaecium, no one was found, and it was thought that someone had tried to play a practical joke. Two hours later in a stormy night the chief conspirator was hoisted up to the Empress's chamber in a wicker basket, and the

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

Basileus, attacked defenseless in his bedchamber, fell dead, his skull split open by a mighty sword-stroke, and his body riddled with wounds.

One obviously must not draw very far-reaching conclusions from such exceptional occurrences. But the extraordinarily significant point is that there was no such impassable barrier as one is apt to imagine between the court of the sovereign and the Empress's apartments. Just as, on the one hand, the Augusta's women received investiture at the hands of the Basileus in the presence of all his courtiers, so the Basilissa permitted many of the high dignitaries, who were by no means "beardless officers", to visit her in her own quarters; and that same Byzantine etiquette which has been represented as so strict and prudish demanded that on certain solemn occasions the Gynaecium should be open to everyone.

For example, when the new Empress, three days after her wedding, left the bridal chamber to take her bath in the Palace of Magnaura, courtiers and people lined the paths of the garden through which she went with her suite. And as the Basilissa passed along, preceded by attendants bearing dressing-gowns, perfumes, boxes, and vessels, and escorted by three maids of honour holding red apples encrusted with pearls, as a symbol of love, the organs played, the people cheered, the court players made coarse jests, and the high officers of state accompanied the Empress to the baths, and waited for her at the door to conduct her back again in pomp to the nuptial chamber.

And several months later, when the Empress gave birth to a son, a week after her delivery the entire

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

court filed past the young mother. In the room, hung for the occasion with gold-embroidered tapestries and glittering with the light of innumerable lamps, the Basilissa lay in a bed covered with golden coverlets, and near her was the cradle of the young heir to the throne. One by one the Praepositus presented to the Augusta the officers of the imperial household, and afterwards, according to their rank, the wives of the great court dignitaries, and even the widows of high officials. Last of all came the aristocracy of the Empire, senators, proconsuls, patricians, and officials of all kinds; and each, as he made his obeisance to the Empress, offered his congratulations, and left a little present near the bed for the new-born child.

One can readily see that these are not harem customs; and in the face of such testimony is it fair to speak of the strict seclusion of the Gynaecium, and of the inflexible prudery of Byzantine ceremonial?

IV

A Byzantine Empress spent by no means all her life within the narrow confines of her private dwelling. Official rules of procedure regulated her position in public life, and defined her part beside the Basileus both in the state ceremonies and in the government of the monarchy.

The importance of court ceremonies in the life of a Byzantine Emperor is well known. One of the most curious works transmitted to us from that distant period, and one of the most useful in reconstructing the strange and picturesque aspects of that vanished

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

society, is the *Book of Ceremonies*, written towards the middle of the tenth century by the Emperor Constantine VII. It is entirely devoted to descriptions of the processions, festivals, audiences, and state banquets, which a heavy and inflexible etiquette imposed as duties upon the sovereign. Although the importance attached to these official acts has been often misunderstood, like so many other things in connexion with Byzantium — St. Louis, for instance, and even Louis XIV, heard Mass more often than a Basileus —, it is nevertheless certain that they constituted a very large part of the business of being Emperor. Now the Empress took part in them constantly. “When there is no Augusta”, says a Byzantine historian, “it is impossible to celebrate the festivals and to give the entertainments prescribed by etiquette.”

Thus, in the public life of the monarchy, the Empress had her part and her share of royalty. The Emperor naturally left in her hands nearly everything connected with the ladies of the court. On Easter, while the Basileus in the nave of St. Sophia was receiving the high dignitaries of the Empire, who solemnly gave him the kiss of peace in memory of Christ's resurrection, the Empress, enthroned in the women's gallery of the Great Church, surrounded by her chamberlains and body-guards, received the wives of the high officials according to their husbands' rank; and each in full court dress of silk, covered with jewels and gold, and crowned with the propoloma, came and kissed the Empress.

Ceaselessly the recurring festivals gathered this brilliant throng of ladies around the Empress. In

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

November, on the feast of the Brumalia, an ancient pagan survival, the Basilissa in the Porphyry Pavilion presented rich silks to the ladies of the court. On the evening of the same feast-day she entertained them elaborately, while the singers from St. Sophia and the Holy Apostles recited poems in her honour, and the court comedians and buffoons amused the company with interludes, and towards the end of dinner representatives of the circus factions with some of the highest state officials performed a slow and stately torch-dance before the Augusta and her guests. It was the Empress, again, who assisted the Emperor in the receptions given to foreign princesses when they visited the Palace at Byzantium. She, as well as the Basileus, gave them audience; she invited them and the women of their suites to dine with her; she showered them with gifts and attentions. In this way she had a certain part in the foreign policy of the monarchy, and on the graciousness of her welcome depended many of the successes of the imperial diplomacy.

But official etiquette by no means limited the Basilissa to the reception of ladies. She often assisted the Emperor her husband still more directly. On Palm Sunday she received with him. At court banquets she sat at table with him, among the senators and high dignitaries honoured by a command to the imperial entertainment. And since, according to etiquette, she had her share in the prescribed acclamations with which the populace were in the habit of saluting their rulers, she did not hesitate to shew herself in public with the Basileus. In the Hippodrome on the occasions of the principal races, and in front

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

of the Sacred Palace at the performance of certain political ceremonies of great importance, the multitude chanted: "Appear with the Augustae, O God-crowned Emperors"! and again: "O God-protected pair, O Basileus, and thou, Glory of the Purple, come and enlighten your slaves, and rejoice the hearts of your people"! and again: "Come forth, Empress of the Romans"!—all of them meaningless phrases if the Basilissa was not in the habit of showing herself on those days in the box in the Hippodrome or on the balcony of the Palace. It was even so little the custom for her to confine herself to the imperial residence that she often appeared in public without the Emperor. Thus, she used to go without him in solemn procession to St. Sophia; she made her state entrance into the capital without him; she went to meet him on his return from military expeditions. For a Byzantine Empress was something more than the consort and associate of the Emperor: the great part which she so often played in politics is due to the fact that from the day that she was first enthroned upon the throne of Constantine she received the fulness of imperial power.

V

In Byzantium reasons of state had, as a rule, little effect upon the Emperor's choice of a consort. The monarch selected his wife in a more original and somewhat extraordinary fashion.

When the Empress Irene wished to find a wife for her son Constantine, she sent messengers up and down the Empire to seek out the most beautiful girls

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

in the monarchy and bring them to the capital. With a view to limiting the choice and facilitating the task of her envoys, the Empress indicated carefully what she considered the suitable age of candidates to be, as well as their height and their size in shoes. After receiving these instructions the messengers set out, and one evening arrived in a Paphlagonian village. Seeing in the distance a large and splendid mansion which had the appearance of belonging to a rich landowner, they decided to pass the night there. Their choice was unfortunate; the proprietor was a saint, who had completely ruined himself by his almsgiving to the poor. Nevertheless, he welcomed the Emperor's envoys with great hospitality, and calling his wife said: "Serve us up a good dinner." Her resources being somewhat limited, she answered: "How can I? You have managed your affairs so well that we haven't so much as a single fowl in the yard." "Go light your fire", the saint replied, "get ready the great dining hall, and set the old ivory table; God will provide our dinner." God did provide; and when the envoys, who were delighted at the way in which they had been made welcome, questioned the old man over the dessert about his family, they found that he had three granddaughters of marriageable age. "In the name of the God-crowned Emperor", they exclaimed, "shew them to us, for there is not in all the Roman Empire a young girl whom we have not seen." The girls were sent for and proved to be charming; and it happened that one of them, Mary, was of the required age and proportions and wore shoes of the specified size.

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

The messengers were delighted with their find, and took the whole family with them to Constantinople. About a dozen other young girls had been assembled there, all very pretty, and most of them of rich and noble families. At first these beautiful creatures rather despised the new-comer; but she, who was by no means a fool, said one day to her companions: "Girls, let's make an agreement that whichever of us shall be chosen by God to be Empress shall help the others to find husbands." Whereupon a general's daughter scornfully answered: "Oh, indeed! I am the richest, the best-born, and the most beautiful; the Emperor will undoubtedly marry me. None of the rest of you need have any hopes, for you have no families to speak of, and nothing but your pretty faces." Needless to say, she was punished for her disdain. When the candidates were brought before the Empress, her son, and the Prime Minister, she was immediately told: "You are charming; but you are not the wife for an Emperor." Mary, on the other hand, instantly won the young sovereign's heart, and he chose her.

There are other similar anecdotes to shew that this was the usual manner of choosing a Byzantine Empress, though sometimes the sovereign simplified matters even more by taking a fancy to some beautiful adventuress, as did Justinian to Theodora. One can see at all events that the Basileis did not insist upon noble birth, and that in their eyes any pretty woman might make a suitable Empress. But it is also noteworthy that the solemn ceremonies accompanying the coronation and marriage gave the future Empress an entirely new character, and made of the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

poor girl of yesterday a superhuman being, the incarnation of power and holiness.

I shall not describe in detail the pompous ceremonies — for all these Byzantine functions are somewhat alike in their monotonous magnificence — with which the future Empress was conducted veiled into the great hall of the Augustaeum to be invested by the Emperor with the purple chlamys, which the Patriarch had already blessed; nor shall I tell how the sovereign placed upon her head the crown with long diamond pendants; nor of the court reception in the Palace Chapel of St. Stephen; nor shall I describe the wedding, when the Patriarch placed the nuptial crown upon the heads of the newly-married pair. Out of all the complicated ritual it will be enough to point out a few salient features, which will clearly indicate the complete sovereignty implied in the glorious title of Empress of Byzantium.

In the first place, the marriage follows the coronation instead of preceding it. It is not as the Emperor's wife that the Empress shares the autocratic power; it is no reflected authority that she receives from her husband. By a pre-marital and independent act she is invested with sovereign powers; and this sovereignty, to which she like the Emperor is raised by God's actual choice, is equal in plenitude to that of the Basileus. And so true is this, that it is not the Emperor who presents the new Empress to the people. After the imposition of the crown has conferred supreme power upon her, she goes forth unaccompanied by the sovereign, and escorted only by her chamberlains and her women. Slowly, between the ranks of guardsmen, senators, patricians, and high dignitaries, she passes

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

through the Palace and goes out upon the terrace, beneath which are stationed the members of the high public services, the soldiers, and the people. Aloft in her rich imperial robes, glittering with gold embroideries, she shews herself to her new subjects and makes herself solemnly known to them. Before her the colours are dipped, grandees and people prostrate themselves, their heads in the dust, and the factions raise the time-honoured acclamations. Very reverently, a candle in either hand, she first bows before the cross; then she greets her people, while a unanimous cry goes up: "God save the Augusta!"

Here is another instance. The coronation of the Empress, indeed, is surrounded with somewhat more mystery than that of the Emperor, for instead of being celebrated in St. Sophia it takes place in the Palace. But one should not imagine this to be the effect of certain so-called Byzantine notions "which imposed" we are told, "a life of seclusion upon the wife, and accorded ill with much publicity." As a matter of fact, all the courtiers, men and women alike, are present at her coronation; and when at the conclusion of the ceremony the sovereigns hold a reception in St. Stephen's Church, there are not, as is sometimes thought, two separate receptions, the Basileus receiving the men, and the Augusta the women. First all the men and then all the women of the court pass before the thrones on which the Emperor and Empress are seated side by side. And after being presented, each in turn, men as well as women, supported under the arms by two silentaries, prostrates himself and kisses the knees of the Basileus and of the Augusta.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Here is a last instance. After their marriage in St. Stephen's the imperial pair are escorted to the bridal chamber by the entire court, both men and women. The people make a lane for them as they go, and salute the new Basilissa as follows: "Welcome, God-chosen Augusta! Welcome, God-protected Augusta! Welcome, Wearer of the Purple! Welcome, thou whom all desire!" The crowd is admitted into the nuptial chamber itself, before the imperial bed of gold, and the newly-married couple have to listen to the acclamations and congratulations all over again. And in the evening at the wedding banquet, the greatest nobles of the court — those who are styled Friends of the Emperor — and the greatest ladies dine with the sovereigns in the Triclinium of the Nineteen Couches. What strikes one most in all these ceremonies is the freedom of association between men and women in this court which has been stigmatised as prudish; and also how little secluded is the life of such an Empress, who is required by official etiquette as the first act of her reign to shew her face to all the people of Byzantium.

We must, of course, guard against over-stating the case. In these delicate matters, custom and etiquette naturally varied with the times. It seems, indeed, that towards the end of the ninth century and during the tenth, perhaps under the influence of the Mohammedan East, a stricter etiquette confined the Empress more closely to the Gynaecium, that she veiled herself more, that she appeared less frequently in public ceremonies. But between the fifth and ninth centuries there is no trace of anything of the sort; and when, from the end of the eleventh century

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

onwards, Byzantium came day by day into closer contact with the West, when Western princesses sat upon the throne of Constantine, this rigidity of etiquette, if it had ever existed, broke down, and the ancient ceremonial perished.

One last example will serve to illustrate fully the rights which law and custom conferred upon a Byzantine Empress. When the Emperor Zeno died, in the year 491, his widow, the Empress Ariadne, seized the power firmly in her own hands, and going forth from the Palace to the Hippodrome with the great dignitaries of court and monarchy, stood up in the imperial box in her robes of state and addressed the assembled people. She told them that by her order the Senate and the high officials were about to meet, and that under her own presidency, they, together with the army, would choose a successor to the deceased Emperor. As a matter of fact, the supreme council of the Empire did meet in the Palace; but its first act was to leave in Ariadne's hands the choice of the new sovereign. Extraordinary as such procedure may seem, one must be careful not to regard it as revolutionary. The Augusta, legitimately invested with supreme power from the day of her coronation, exercises it legitimately in all its fullness, and transmits it as it pleases her. The people in ratifying her choice formally recognise her rights. "Thine is the imperial power, Ariadne Augusta", cried the multitude. And the experienced minister who in the sixth century edited the ceremonial code from which this story is taken says explicitly that the question of the succession becomes extraordinarily difficult "when there is neither Augusta nor Emperor to transmit the power."

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

And therefore it is that in every act involving a change in the government of the monarchy, the election or the association of a new Basileus, the Basilissa always appears officially, shewing herself in the Hippodrome, haranguing the people, energetic and active, without anyone's being at all astonished or scandalised. Since the power was vested in her, she could as her fancy directed either create a new Emperor, or rule as Regent in the name of her young children, or even reign herself. At a time when the Germanic West would have been indignant at the idea of a woman reigning, oriental Byzantium accepted peacefully an Empress who in her official documents proudly styled herself as a man: "Irene, great Basileus and Autocrat of the Romans."

Byzantine miniatures have preserved the portraits of many of these princesses of long ago. They are of many different physical types, for as a matter of fact every nation gave Empresses to Byzantium — Europe and Asia, the Caucasus and Greece, Constantinople and the provinces, Syria and Hungary, France and Germany, and even the barbarous Khazars and Bulgars. In like manner they shew equally profound differences of character: "Among those Augustae" as has been well said, "was every conceivable type of woman — politicians, like Theodora or Irene of Athens; writers, like Eudocia or Anna Comnena; women of pleasure, like Zoë Porphyrogenita; and others pure and devout, like her sister Theodora; some who cared only for concocting new combinations of perfumes and elegancies of toilet, or for inventing gowns and coiffures to revolutionise Byzantine feminine society; some whom no one ever

LIFE OF A BYZANTINE EMPRESS

talked of and others about whom there was too much talk; some whose doors were opened only to pious monks and zealot priests; others who welcomed buffoons and story-tellers; and some whose windows opened now and again to drop out a human body sewn in a sack into the silent waters of the Bosphorus.”¹ To understand them, we must therefore not be deceived either by the sumptuous uniformity of the imperial costume that they wore, nor by the apparently rigid ceremonial which may seem to have regulated their lives. Their natures differed, and so did the parts they played; and it is precisely this which constitutes their interest for us.

In the history of a vanished society it is not the wars, picturesque as they may be, nor the palace revolutions and barrack mutinies, though they were often tragic enough, which should engage our chief attention. The most fruitful procedure is to endeavour to reconstruct the varying aspects of daily life, the different ways of living and thinking, the manners and customs — the civilisation, in short. On all of these the life of a Byzantine Empress may perhaps shed some new light; and if, in addition to these portraits of Empresses, this great lady and that woman of the middle class are well enough known for us to attempt their portrayal also, in restoring them to their historical setting and in reconstructing the surroundings in which they lived we may have accomplished a not wholly useless task. From these seemingly restricted studies there will emerge a more general impression, and with it some vivid, picturesque scenes from the little-known society of distant Byzantium.

¹ A. N. Rambaud, *loc. cit.*, p. 838.

II

ATHENAI S

I

ON the 7th of June, 421, the Most Pious Emperor Theodosius, then about twenty years of age, married a young girl who came from Athens, where her father had been a professor in the university. She was born of pagan parents; but in order to ascend the throne of Constantine she had become a Christian, and on the day of her baptism had changed her pretty name Athenais to Eudocia, a name at once more Christian and more suited to her imperial rank.

How did this astonishing marriage between a little provincial girl and the all-powerful Basileus come about? The answer is simple. It was a love-match, and the Byzantine chroniclers have fortunately given us the whole romantic story. The young Theodosius, from the time he had reached man's estate, had contemplated marriage. He pestered his eldest sister Pulcheria, who had brought him up and governed the Empire in his name, and insisted that she should find a wife for him. Neither birth nor wealth mattered; but he insisted that she should be beautiful, supremely beautiful, with a beauty such as Byzantium had never before beheld. And so to please him Pulcheria searched all the East without

A T H E N A I S

finding anyone possessed of the requisite perfections. Paulinus, the friend of her childhood, the Emperor's crony, also made investigations, when chance unexpectedly threw in their way the longed-for beauty.

Leontius, a professor at the University of Athens, had two sons and a daughter. He was a rich man. But when he came to die, he left his entire fortune, by a curious whim, to his sons Valerius and Gesius. "To my beloved daughter Athenais" he wrote in his will, "I bequeath one hundred pieces of gold. To succeed in the world she will have her good luck, which is better than any other woman's." In vain Athenais begged her brothers to share their father's estate with her; she was obliged to leave home and seek refuge with her mother's sister, who took her to Constantinople, where another aunt, Leontius's sister, lived. These two women persuaded the girl to invoke the help of the Palace against her brothers, and she obtained an audience of the Augusta Pulcheria. Athenais was twenty years of age. She was very beautiful, being rather tall, with a wonderful figure, and curly blond hair that framed her features in a golden aureole and enhanced the brilliancy of her fair complexion. Her lovely eyes were intelligent and full of life, and she kept them modestly lowered. She had a pure Greek nose, and she carried herself with grace and dignity. Furthermore, she could express herself well, and stated her request to perfection. She made an immediate conquest of Pulcheria, who was enthusiastic about her. The Augusta asked the girl a few questions about her family and her past life, and soon ran to tell her brother of the marvellous creature she had discovered. Theodosius in great excitement

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

was smitten with Athenais from his sister's description, and begged the Augusta to shew him the young enchantress at once. So he hid himself behind a tapestry with his friend Paulinus, and waited for the young petitioner to enter the room. The effect she made upon the two young men was prodigious; Paulinus was delighted, and the Emperor fell completely in love with her. A few weeks later, after the Patriarch Atticus had instructed her in the Christian religion and purified her in the waters of baptism, Athenais-Eudocia became Empress of Byzantium.

It is difficult to say how much truth there is in this charming tale. The outlines of it do not appear before the eleventh century and were greatly elaborated by the fancy of later periods. Contemporary historians know nothing of the details I have just given. The only undoubted fact is that the new Empress was born an Athenian and a pagan, and that she was very pretty and perfectly educated. That was sufficient to captivate Theodosius, who was in any case anxious for political reasons to perpetuate the dynasty; and one can understand, moreover, that the ambitious Pulcheria, who was supreme, and anxious to preserve her supremacy, should wish to further a marriage in which the bride would owe everything to her. She was her godmother; she wished to adopt her; and she may well have thought that in the circumstances there would be no changes in the Sacred Palace.

II

At the time when Athenais-Eudocia became the consort of Theodosius, life in the Imperial Palace at

ATHENAI S

Byzantium presented a peculiar appearance. For seven years Pulcheria, a young woman of twenty-two, the eldest sister of the Basileus, had ruled over it with complete authority. She was astute, energetic, ambitious, and essentially a politician. After the death of Arcadius, she, as the oldest member of the family, had carried on the government during her brother's minority, and in 414, at the age of fifteen, had taken the title of Augusta, thereby regularising her assumption of power. Being anxious to devote herself without hindrance to her task — also, perhaps, not wishing to share the authority with another — she had made a vow, at the age of sixteen, never to marry, and as a memorial of her promise had dedicated in St. Sophia a golden table adorned with precious stones. And, as she was very religious, she had reformed the court and turned the Palace into a monastery. Under the influence of the Patriarch Atticus, Pulcheria's two sisters, Arcadia and Marina, had followed her example and taken the vow of celibacy. And the suites of these pious Princesses so modelled themselves upon them that, night and day, hymns and religious exercises were constantly in progress in the imperial dwelling. Instead of gorgeous ceremonies and splendid costumes, military processions and the cheers of the multitude, nothing was heard but the intoning of the offices, nothing seen but the sombre habit of priests and monks. The Palace, having been purged of the licentious courtiers who had dishonoured it, and carefully ruled in every detail according to grave and holy precepts, presented a totally new appearance. Disdaining luxury, beautiful clothes, and the idleness characteristic of

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

high rank, these Princesses worked with their own hands, spinning and sewing for the poor, extending their charities and their good works. Pulcheria founded churches and gave vast endowments to hospitals and charitable institutions; her sisters imitated her. A great gust of piety, charity, and renunciation, reinvigorated the Sacred Palace, and swept away the old atmosphere of intrigue.

It was thus that Pulcheria had brought up the young Theodosius. Highly educated herself — she knew both Greek and Latin, an accomplishment already rare at that period —, she had surrounded him with excellent masters and carefully-chosen companions. He profited by his good teaching, and was really a very learned young man. He had been taught Greek and Latin, astronomy, mathematics, natural history, and many other things; he could draw and paint, and was fond of illuminating his manuscripts with beautiful miniatures. He had a taste for reading, and had formed a large library, and in the evening liked to work very late by the light of a lamp that he had invented. His reward is to be known in history as Theodosius the Calligrapher. But Pulcheria had watched even more carefully over her brother's moral education. He was very devout, he took pleasure in singing hymns with his sisters, he fasted regularly twice a week, and he liked to dispute with theologians. Pulcheria herself had even given him lessons in deportment; she had taught him how an Emperor should wear his clothes, how he should receive people, when to smile and when to appear grave and serious — in short all the refinements of ceremonial that an Emperor was

ATHENAI S

obliged to know. And thus, at the time of his marriage, Theodosius was a nice young fellow, of medium height, fair, with black eyes, very well brought up, very polite, quiet, gentle, and amiable, and somewhat of a bore and a pedant. Of physical exercises, he cared only for hunting, and, not being particularly energetic, was not in the least attracted by war and fighting. He was of a sedentary disposition and preferred to stay in the Palace; and, as his character was feeble, he was easily influenced. In short, he was a conscientious and mediocre Emperor, good enough perhaps for quiet times, but totally unsuited for the troubled century in which he lived.

Between her imperious sister-in-law and her easy-going husband, what would become of Athenais? It must not be forgotten that she too was a clever woman. At the time of her birth Athens, her native country, was still the great university town of the Hellenic East, the finest museum of ancient Greece, the last refuge of pagan learning. As a professor's daughter she naturally had received an incomparable education. Her father had taught her rhetoric; had made her learn the masterpieces of ancient literature, Homer, the tragic poets, Lysias, and Demosthenes; had trained her, in the manner of the schools, to improvise brilliantly on given subjects, to compose pretty verses, to speak with elegance. Furthermore, she had been initiated into the mysteries of the Neoplatonic philosophy, whose most illustrious exponents had been made welcome in Athens; she also knew astronomy and geometry, and succeeded equally in everything. She pleased Pulcheria by her intelligence and her gift of expression, and one may

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

well believe that she delighted Theodosius as much by her erudition as by her beauty.

The education that Athenais had received was an altogether pagan one, and the thin veneer of Christianity which the Patriarch had applied to her soul failed, in all probability, to impair in any way the teachings of her youth. Moreover, among people who remained faithful to ancient ideas, the Emperor's marriage with the young Athenian may well have appeared in the light of a victory for paganism, or, at the least, as a promise of toleration. And, in fact, the Empress did not at first differ materially from the daughter of Leontius.

Indeed, Constantinople in the fifth century, notwithstanding its position as a Christian capital, retained a strong impress of paganism. It had been enriched by Constantine and his successors with the finest spoils of ancient sanctuaries; its squares and its palaces were adorned with the most renowned masterpieces of Greek sculpture; and in this incomparable museum the dethroned gods seemed still to retain their prestige and their glory. At the court, in spite of the dominant tone of religion and bigotry, many ceremonies and festivals preserved the memory of pagan traditions; and although pious folk considered any dealings with the Graces and the Muses a mortal sin, poetry was by no means exiled from the Imperial Palace. Eudocia was fond of verses and took pleasure in composing them, and she found about her people to share her tastes and encourage her in them. One of her first acts immediately after her marriage was to compose a poem in heroic verse upon the Persian War, which had just been brought

A T H E N A I S

to a successful conclusion. She could have done nothing better calculated to please Theodosius and win completely the love of her studious husband. When, towards the end of the year 422, she in addition bore him a daughter, her influence increased still more; on the 2nd of January, 423, the Basileus gave her, as a New-Year's present, the title of Augusta, thus making her officially the equal of Pulcheria. And in the privacy of the imperial family her ascendancy over her weak husband drew steadily greater.

It is not unlikely that she had a voice in the foundation, in the year 425, of the University of Constantinople. In it we can see the preponderating position given to Greek: whereas thirteen professors taught the Latin language and literature, fifteen were appointed to teach Greek; one chair was created in philosophy; and the most eminent men of the times, some of them very recent Christians, were invited to lecture at the new university. It should, however, be observed that, if the foundation of a university and the consideration thereby shewn to letters are characteristic of the taste of the period, the new institution had in general a Christian tone — witness the subordinate position given to philosophy — and was intended by its founders to be in a sense a rival to the too-pagan University of Athens. And this illustrates vividly the evolution which was slowly taking place in the soul of the Empress Eudocia.

Living in the devout atmosphere of the court, she felt unconsciously the influence of her surroundings. Her marriage may have seemed a victory for paganism; but as a matter of fact she had done nothing for her former co-religionists; and in 424, the Emperor

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Theodosius, in renewing the edicts of proscription against the worship of the false gods, declared solemnly that he "thought there were no longer any pagans." A further significant fact is that Eudocia, like a true Byzantine, developed a passion for theological disputes. When, in 428, Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, taught the heresy which bears his name, and the ambitious Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, more from jealousy of a rival than from devotion to orthodoxy, thereupon started a serious quarrel in the Eastern Church, Eudocia joined with her husband in championing the Patriarch of the capital against his enemies, and tried to checkmate the turbulent successor of Athanasius, whose chief aim was to establish a primacy for his see over all the eastern bishoprics. This episode is valuable not only as an illustration of the part which Athenais-Eudocia played in religious quarrels, but also as a proof of her increasing influence and of the breach that was widening between her and Pulcheria.

In arranging her brother's marriage the imperious Augusta had had no intention of resigning the power that Theodosius had permitted her to exercise. Nevertheless Eudocia's star waxed ever more powerful. She advanced her friends and relatives in the sovereign's favour; she used her influence on behalf of Paulinus, the Master of the Offices, and the Egyptian Cyrus of Panopolis, who, like her, was fond of books and wrote verses; she had her flatterers and her party at court, and soon she was not afraid to oppose her sister-in-law. Rumours of this underground rivalry spread beyond the Palace, and clever intriguers egged the two women on in the hope of gaining

A T H E N A I S

some personal advantage. Cyril, especially, made use of it in his quarrel with Nestorius; when writing to the Emperor and his wife, he wrote also to the Augusta Pulcheria, whom he knew to be hostile to his rival, and whose influence with the weak Basileus he counted upon. But even though Theodosius reproved him in very energetic terms for his conduct, saying: "Either you thought that my wife, my sister, and I, were not in harmony with one another, or Your Piety hoped that your letters might sow dissension between us" — notwithstanding this protest, the results proved that Cyril had not been mistaken in his calculations. Theodosius, after having convoked the Council of Ephesus with the firm intention of upholding Nestorius, allowed himself finally to be imposed upon by Cyril's illegal audacity, by the clamour of the monks of Constantinople, by the advice of the high dignitaries whom the Patriarch of Alexandria had won over, and above all by the influence of Pulcheria. The gathering of 431 was a victory for the Alexandrians and a triumph for the imperious Augusta. For Eudocia it was a serious reverse; she was later to suffer even more cruelly from the consequences of these court rivalries, and from the struggle for influence in which she was engaged.

III

The journey which Athenais-Eudocia made in the year 438 to Jerusalem provides interesting testimony regarding the outstanding feature of her personality: the mixture in her soul of pagan memories and Christian preoccupations.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

In 423 the court of Constantinople had received an important visitor. The celebrated Galla Placidia, sister of Honorius and aunt of Theodosius II, having been obliged to leave the Palace at Ravenna, had come with her daughter Honoria and her young son Valentinian to take refuge in Byzantium. A marriage had been proposed between the imperial children, the new-born Eudoxia and the five-year-old Caesar, who was now, by the death of Honorius, heir to the Western Empire. Theodosius II spared no pains to procure the recognition of his future son-in-law in Italy, under the guardianship of Galla Placidia. Fourteen years later, in 437, the cherished scheme was fulfilled. Athenais-Eudocia had ardently desired this alliance, which would set her daughter upon the glorious throne of the West, and had vowed, if the marriage took place, to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, like St. Helena before her, to give thanks to God in the very place where His divine Son had died for mankind. Her necessary separation from a child whom she adored made her perhaps the more willing to undertake the journey, and in 438 the Empress set out for the Holy City.

The first place she visited was Antioch. This city, which was still full of the traditions and monuments of ancient civilisation, awoke within her the memories of her pagan youth. In the Senate House, seated on a golden throne that glittered with precious stones, she received the civic magistrates and the principal inhabitants, and, recalling her father's teachings, improvised a brilliant speech in honour of the city whose guest she was. She alluded to the distant age when Greek colonies had carried Hellenic civilisation

A T H E N A I S

throughout the archipelago as far as the coasts of Syria, and ended by quoting a line of Homer:

I claim proud kinship with your race and blood.

The Antiochenes were too cultivated and too fond of letters not to be wildly enthusiastic about a Princess who thus invoked the purest traditions of Hellenism. And, as in the splendid days of ancient Greece, the municipal senate voted her a golden statue in the Curia, and deposited in the museum a bronze stele inscribed with a record of the imperial visit.

Her stay in Jerusalem is in striking contrast with this vision of antiquity. Jerusalem was essentially a Christian city, full of pious memories of the Saviour, peopled with religious of both sexes, and covered with churches and monasteries built over all the spots which the Passion of Christ had hallowed. Eudocia remained there an entire year devoting herself to religion and good works, visiting the Holy Places, attending the consecration of churches, and distributing rich gifts among the most venerated sanctuaries. In return, she obtained precious relics — some of the bones of St. Stephen and the chains with which the Apostle Peter had been bound. These she brought piously from Jerusalem to Constantinople and deposited them with ceremony in the Church of St. Lawrence. Half of the chains she sent to her beloved daughter in Rome, the young Empress Eudoxia, the thought of whom had inspired and accompanied her on her voyage, and the Church of San Pietro in Vincoli was built to receive them.

A few years later Athenais-Eudocia was to return

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

to the Holy City of Jerusalem, and this time for the rest of her life.

In 439, at the time of her return to the capital, the Basilissa was at the height of her glory. Her daughter was married to an Emperor, and she herself had just made a royal progress through the East amidst universal rejoicing. She seems to have thought that the time was ripe for a more overt struggle with her former benefactress and present rival, the Augusta Pulcheria. At all events, between 439 and 441, her friends became increasingly influential in the Palace; the office of Praetorian Praefect of the East was given to her protégé Cyrus of Panopolis, a poet and man of letters whose essentially Hellenic culture had been for some time past a bond between him and the Empress. Such a man could never commend himself to Pulcheria and the religious party, and it was thus a personal triumph for Eudocia to have won him the favour of Theodosius. This success encouraged her to go still further. In the Sacred Palace at that period the eunuchs had great influence over the irresolute Emperor; Eudocia joined forces with Chrysaphius, the favourite for the time being, in order to effect the definite removal of Pulcheria from the government; and for a while she seemed to have won. The Augusta was obliged to leave court and retire to her own house; but, while appearing to abdicate, Pulcheria never abandoned the struggle. Her orthodox friends, disliking the new direction of affairs and the favour shewn to statesmen of over-liberal opinions, were in the end to make Eudocia pay dearly for her ephemeral victory.

The story of her downfall is no less romantic than

ATHENAI S

that of her elevation to the throne. Paulinus, the Master of the Offices, was a great favourite of the Emperor's, with whom he had played as a child and whose confidence he had won; and he was equally a friend of the Empress's, since he had used all his influence to bring about her marriage. The Basileus had chosen him to be his *paranymphos* at his wedding, and thereafter had loaded him with honours. Paulinus was on terms of the greatest intimacy with the sovereigns, whom he visited freely whenever he chose, and his influence was powerful in the Palace. Now, Paulinus was handsome, elegant, and of haughty carriage; he is said to have made an impression even upon the austere Pulcheria herself. The enemies of Athenais were not slow in making capital out of all this; the passionate devotion of the Master of the Offices for the Basilissa and the real friendship which she shewed for him became in their hands weapons to arouse the jealousy of Theodosius and thereby to produce the most unfortunate results.

The Emperor, so runs the tale, went to church one day, and Paulinus, who was unwell, was excused from taking part in the solemn procession. On the way a beggar offered the Emperor a Phrygian apple of extraordinary size. Theodosius bought it, and, as he was still devotedly attached to his wife, sent it to her. She, in turn, made a present of it to Paulinus, and the Master of the Offices, not knowing who had given it to the Empress, offered it to Theodosius, thinking to please him. The Emperor was astonished, and, as soon as he had returned to the Palace, summoned the Empress and blurted out: "Where is the apple I sent you?" "I have eaten it"

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

replied Eudocia imprudently. Theodosius adjured her as she hoped for salvation to tell him the truth; but she gave him the same answer. Then, taking the apple out from under his cloak, the Basileus shewed it to his untruthful wife. There followed a violent scene. Furiously jealous, the Emperor ceased to live with his wife; and Paulinus was completely disgraced and exiled to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where soon afterwards Theodosius had him assassinated.

Here again it is difficult to determine with any degree of certainty what truth there may be in the story. The oldest accounts of it that we have date only from the sixth century, and contemporaries knew nothing of it, or at least did not record it. The main features, however, have an air of verisimilitude. It is not necessary to assume that Eudocia was guilty of anything other than imprudence; many years later, when on her death-bed and about to appear before her Maker, she swore that she and Paulinus had been absolutely innocent. But the fury and jealousy of Theodosius speedily resulted in the Empress's disgrace. Her enemies made good use of the affair to her damage, and to regain their influence over the Emperor. After the disgrace of Paulinus came that of Eudocia's other friend, the Praefect Cyrus. At last, knowing that her influence was gone, almost openly quarrelling with her husband, alone, suspected in her own court, exasperated, furthermore, by the slanders which were circulated about her, and justly outraged by the odious murder of Paulinus, she sought permission of Theodosius to retire to Jerusalem. The Emperor accorded it gladly,

A T H E N A I S

and may even have urged her to go. He felt henceforth only hatred, suspicion, and bitterness, for her, and found it easy to separate for ever from the wife he once had loved so much.

It was about the year 442 that Eudocia returned to the Holy City, and she lived there eighteen long years until her death. This sad and melancholy end of her life seems to have strangely altered the Princess's character. She had hoped, on leaving Constantinople, to find peace and forgetfulness at the tomb of Christ; but even in her distant exile she was pursued by the rancour of enemies, and her husband's suspicions brutally invaded the calm of her retreat. In 444, two of her intimate friends, the priest Severus and the deacon John, whom she had taken with her from Byzantium and who had great influence with her, were denounced to the Emperor, arrested, and put to death. The Empress, furious at the outrage, revenged herself by bloodshed; Saturninus, the governor of Jerusalem, was murdered by assassins whom she had hired. Afterwards her passionate nature sought other means of satisfying its restlessness. She devoted herself to religion, living among ascetics and monks, and became an adherent of the most mystical form of Christian theology. The little pagan girl of Athens took sides with the Monophysites, who at this very period were winning a victory for their doctrine, under Dioscorus of Alexandria, at the Conciliabulum of Ephesus (449), and forcing their will upon Theodosius. It may be that she hoped by associating with them to revenge herself in some way upon the Emperor, upon Pulcheria, and upon those who had brought about her

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

disgrace. Whatever the reason, she threw herself heart and soul into the struggle, and put all that was left of her influence and wealth at the service of her friends. Even after the Council of Chalcedon, in 450, concurrently with the Roman legates, had solemnly condemned her favourite heresy, she clung to it obstinately, perhaps because it still pleased her to oppose Pulcheria, whom she hated, and who, now that Theodosius was dead, shared Eudocia's throne with a Prince Consort. The Basilissa eagerly encouraged the dissenters, and incited them to armed resistance to the imperial forces. The representations of her daughter and of her son-in-law, and the entreaties of Pope Leo the Great himself were necessary to bring Eudocia back to Orthodoxy.

She yielded at last to the pontiff's admonitions, and in order to win the "eternal glory" which he promised her, used all her remaining influence to pacify the Palestinian monks who had risen against their bishops, and to guide penitent heretics to the faith of Chalcedon (453). Every year as it passed brought fresh sorrows to the aged woman. Her husband Theodosius died in 450, and in 455 her sister-in-law Pulcheria followed him: her condition as a dethroned Empress remained unchanged. In the West, during the sack of Rome in 455, her daughter Eudoxia and her granddaughters had fallen into the hands of the Vandals, and one of them had been forced to marry Genseric. In the East, another dynasty had replaced the family of Theodosius the Great upon the throne of Byzantium. Eudocia, now no longer of any importance, was forgotten. In the Holy City, which she loved, she found consolation in

A T H E N A I S

building hospitals, convents, and churches, in repairing the city wall, and in writing verses — the last vestige of her early taste for letters. Thus engaged, she died about the year 460, and was buried in the Basilica of St. Stephen, which she had founded; and the grateful people of Jerusalem gave to her who had done so much for their city the title of “the New Helena.”

IV

Athenais-Eudocia had indeed a strange career: she was born in Athens a pagan; through a love-match she became Empress of Byzantium; and she died in exile at Jerusalem near the tomb of Christ, a devoted and impassioned Christian mystic. And it is just because of these contrasts in her romantic and melancholy life that she is of such interest to the historian. Placed on the borders of two worlds, at the meeting point of two civilisations, combining in herself the dying traditions of pagan culture with the precepts of victorious Christianity, and having, withal, sufficient intelligence and education to understand the evolution in process around her, she presents a curious and significant example of the way in which the most contradictory ideas and the most violent contrasts could, in that century, exist side by side in a single personality. Her life has already demonstrated the fusion of these diverse elements; in her writings it is even more apparent.

Eudocia had always loved poetry. In the period of her greatness she had, as we have seen, celebrated in heroic verse the victories won by the imperial armies over the Persians, and her eulogy of Antioch

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

may have been composed in verse. In the last years of her life she once more diverted herself with literary exercises; but this time she was inspired exclusively by religious subjects. She translated into heroic verse parts of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth; even in the ninth century so good a literary critic as the Patriarch Photius admired her work greatly, and considered it quite remarkable "for a woman, and an Empress at that." She also made similar translations of the prophecies of Zechariah and of Daniel which the grammarian Tzetzes highly commends, referring to the talent of "the golden Empress, the very learned daughter of the great Leontius." Moreover she composed the *Homero-centra*, or Homeric Centos, in which she undertook to tell the episodes of the life of Christ by means of Homeric verses ingeniously assembled. That happened to be a style of composition greatly esteemed in her time; and Eudocia, as she herself acknowledged, was only continuing the work of one of her contemporaries, Bishop Patricius. It must, however, be admitted, in spite of the praises which Byzantine critics of later times bestowed upon the imperial labours, that her production was of no great value. At bottom it has no sort of originality of any kind; and, notwithstanding Eudocia's vaunt that she "had made the sacred stories harmonious", the form is no better. Her language is feeble and her versification mediocre. In short, the only interesting and characteristic feature of the work is the attempt to clothe the life of Christ with the rhythm and language of Homer, thus achieving a strange union of pagan and Christian elements. There would therefore be very little to

ATHENAI S

say about the writings of Athenais-Eudocia if she was not the author of a more curious work — namely, a poem in three cantos on St. Cyprian of Antioch, much admired by Photius, and of which some important fragments have been preserved.

According to the legend, Cyprian of Antioch was a celebrated magician. One day a young pagan, Aglaidas, came to ask him to use his mysterious science on his behalf. He loved a Christian maiden, Justina, who did not reciprocate his affection, and saw no means other than diabolical of overcoming her resistance. Cyprian consented, and in order to vanquish the virgin put forth all his powers, to such effect that he himself soon succumbed to Justina's radiant beauty. All the magician's attempts were in vain; the demons whom he invoked fled before the sign of the cross which the young girl made. At last, becoming convinced of the vanity of his horrid arts, Cyprian burnt his books of magic, gave all his goods to the poor, and embraced Christianity. The defeated lover did likewise. Finally the repentant magician became Bishop of Antioch, and with Justina bravely underwent martyrdom for his faith.

The most interesting part of the poem that I have briefly outlined is the second book, containing Cyprian's confession. When the time had come for him to abjure his errors, the learned pagan determined to make the story of his life public, and to tell the assembled people all that he had gathered from the magic arts of paganism, all the sinful things he had done with the accursed help of the demons, and how in the end, when his soul was enlightened, he had come to repent and be converted. In the course

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

of his long recital Cyprian explains how he had been initiated in all the holy places of paganism: at Athens and at Eleusis; upon Olympus,

Where foolish mortals say the false gods live;
at Argos and in Phrygia, where the augur's art is taught; in Egypt and in Chaldaea, where one can learn the mysteries of astrology. Forcefully he tells how he had studied

Those fleeting forms that ape the eternal wisdom;
how he had fed upon that ancient and baneful science spread abroad by demons, to the undoing of the human race. By his accursed skill he had been able to raise up even the Prince of Demons, who had

Given the lordship of the world to him,
And power upon the legions of the damned.

But this Satan whom Cyprian describes is not the Devil of the Middle Ages; in his sinister grandeur he is more suggestive of the fallen archangel whom Milton was later to portray in *Paradise Lost*:

His face was like to a flower of purest gold
Shining in the flame-radiance of his eyes.
Upon his brow a glittering crown was set;
His vesture was resplendent.
Earth trembled when he moved; about his throne
Numberless hosts kept vigil; like a god
He seemed, and like one thought to vie with God,
Nor feared to battle with the Lord Eternal.

This fallen god is the father of vanities, and builds of vain shadows all that can deceive and destroy mankind:

A T H E N A I S

Cities and palaces and shadowy streams,
Deep woods, and even the longed-for sight of home,
And all the illusions of night-wanderers —

deceptive mirages, wherewith the demons fool men
and lead them on to damnation.

Next, he tells the story of the temptation of Justina. Cyprian lets loose demon upon demon against her, even Satan himself; but all in vain. Then the magician creates phantom seducers for her undoing. In order to have the readier access to her, so that he may tempt her even more sorely, he transforms himself now into a young woman, now into a beautiful bird that sings entrancingly; he even changes Aglaidas into a swallow, so that he can fly to his sweetheart. But beneath the pure and steadfast gaze of the maiden the lying bird falls heavily to the ground. Cyprian then tries other means. Justina's family is overwhelmed with every kind of calamity, and the plague decimates her native city; but nothing can move the inflexible girl. In the face of so many failures the defeated magician begins to doubt his own power; he curses Satan, and resolves to break the compact which binds him to the Prince of Devils. And like Justina he now opposes the sign of the cross to the onslaughts of the Enemy. But Satan ironically and implacably taunts the victim who would escape his clutches:

Christ will not snatch thee from my hands, he never
Opens his arms to one who has obeyed me.

And the wretch, terrified by the menace of eternal damnation, ends his confession with this pathetic appeal:

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Such was my life; say now, will Christ be moved
To grant my prayer?

Throughout this poem there are passages of real and vigorous beauty, and it at once arouses in the mind a host of literary reminiscences and comparisons. Cyprian and Satan are Faust and Mephistopheles; and in the proud, splendid demon of the Greek writer, in the haughty speeches which are put into his mouth, there is already something of the fallen archangel of *Paradise Lost*. There are passages elsewhere which suggest *The Divine Comedy*, such for instance, as that in which Eudocia describes vigorously the personifications of the vices which evil spirits spread throughout the world: Falsehood and Lust, Fraud and Hatred, Hypocrisy and Vanity. And indeed it is no small merit in a Greek work of the fifth century that it should thus recall Dante, Goethe, and Milton. Does this imply that Athenais-Eudocia is to be credited with great originality? Here again her personal contribution is but slight, for not one of these admirable inventions is of her creating. As early as the fourth century, probably in Syria, the legend of St. Cyprian of Antioch had become sufficiently popular to be rendered into Greek prose. This is the tale which the Empress put into verse, as she had versified the Scriptures and the life of Christ. The beauty of the subject she chose is no proof of her intellectual superiority.

But she deserves some credit, at least, for having chosen it; and it is by her very choice that her work is of importance for the study of her character. One

A T H E N A I S

may fancy that the story of Cyprian of Antioch had a very special interest for Athenais-Eudocia, for it was in a certain sense her own story. Her parents had wished her to learn, like the magician, "All that there is in earth and air and sea." Like him she had been initiated "Into the foolish wisdom of the Greeks." Like him "She had thought she lived, though being in truth but dead." Then, like him, she had renounced "The impious faith of idols", and had broken "Vain images of the gods." And like him, also, having become a Christian and devout she longed to convince "Those who take pleasure still in perverse idols." And this is why one has a right to imagine that into her edifying story Athenais-Eudocia has put something of herself.

And yet it cannot be said that even this sincerity of hers has added any touch of genius to her performance. Here, as in her other poems, the form, her only contribution, is mediocre. The work itself, however, is full of interest when we come to study the psychology of our heroine. From the very beginning of her contact with Christianity, the new influence rapidly blotted out of her soul all the graces of pagan antiquity and all the charm of the recollections of her youth. Athens, Eleusis, and Argos, all those holy places where her early years had been spent, were to her from henceforth only cities of refuge for the false gods. The learning in which she had been brought up seemed an illusion sent by malevolent demons; the beautiful legends that had delighted her childhood meant no more to her now than old wives' tales. As Renan says in a celebrated passage of his *Saint Paul*:

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Ah! beautiful, pure images, very gods and very goddesses, tremble, all of ye! The fatal word has gone forth: ye are idols. The error of this ugly little Jew is your death-warrant.

It was thus that in a day triumphant Christianity completely transformed Athenais. The learned young pagan girl-philosopher of yesterday vanishes, and in her place we have only the Most Pious Empress Eudocia; and when some vague echoes of her classical training sounded in her soul, when she found that her Hellenic education still kept alive within her the worship of form and the memory of Homer, perhaps she feared that she was yielding once again to the frauds and deceits of Satan — if it were not rather that she thought, like a good Christian, that by consecrating the glories of paganism to the service of the Divine Majesty she had thereby made them to become sanctified.

III

THEODORA

THE adventurous life of Theodora, Empress of Byzantium, who, beginning her career behind the scenes in the Hippodrome, rose to the throne of the Caesars, has always aroused curiosity and excited the imagination. During her lifetime her extraordinary good fortune so greatly astonished her contemporaries that the idle tongues of Constantinople invented the most incredible stories to explain it—hence all that mass of gossip that Procopius has gathered together painstakingly in his *Secret History*, and handed down to posterity. After her death the legend grew to still greater dimensions; Orientals and Occidentals, Syrians, Byzantines, and Slavs, added more and more touches to the romantic incidents of her romantic story; and because of this rowdy fame Theodora, alone out of so many Princesses who sat upon the throne of Byzantium, has been well known down to our own times, and almost popular.¹

I do not feel, however, that we have the right to assume any very exact knowledge of this famous Empress, whom so many regard as simply an illus-

¹ For the details of Theodora's life I refer the reader to my monograph: *Théodora, impératrice de Byzance*, Paris, 1904. I have felt, nevertheless, the necessity of including a sketch of this celebrated Empress among my portraits of Byzantine princesses.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

trious adventuress. Down to the present time, the majority of those who have attempted to describe her have used chiefly, almost exclusively, the anecdotes which Procopius retails. I am far from maintaining that his work is of no value; I even think that by a careful study of it one could become better acquainted than heretofore with the psychology of Theodora during her stormy youth. But it must always be borne in mind that *The Secret History* is not our only source of information. Other, newer documents have been discovered, mainly in the last few years, from which we can gather more material for a character-study of the celebrated Empress. *The Lives of the Blessed Orientals*, which was compiled about the middle of the sixth century by an intimate friend of the Empress, John, Bishop of Ephesus; the unpublished fragments of the same author's great *Ecclesiastical History*; the anonymous chronicle attributed to Zacharias of Mytilene; and other contemporary works, such as the biographies of the Patriarch Severus and Jacobus Baradaeus, the Apostle of the Monophysites, have all been published or translated from the Syriac manuscripts in which they lay forgotten; and they shed a curious light upon the part that Theodora played [in questions of religion and politics. There are other writers as well, longer known to us but rarely enough consulted, such as Johannes Lydus; there are the new fragments of Malalas, not to speak of the Imperial Novels, whose tiresome verbosity has, in spite of the great amount of important material they contain, damped the ardour of many; and even Procopius himself, who, happily for us, has left other works

THEODORA

besides *The Secret History*. And from all these writings, if one takes the trouble to read them carefully, certain facts emerge which place the people of Justinian's court in a different light from that in which they are generally presented to us.

I

In the early years of the sixth century the notoriety of the actress and dancer Theodora was widespread throughout Constantinople.

Little is known of her origins. Some of the later chroniclers say that she was born in Cyprus, the hot, passionate land of Aphrodite. Others, with greater likelihood, bring her from Syria. But, whatever her birthplace, she came while still a child to Byzantium with her parents; and it was in the corrupt and turbulent capital that her youth was spent.

Her family is equally obscure. In the legend, out of reverence for the imperial rank to which she attained, she is given an illustrious, or at least a presentable, ancestry in the person of a steady and respectable father of senatorial rank. As a matter of fact, she seems to have been of humbler origin. Her father, if *The Secret History* may be trusted, was a poor man named Acacius, by profession guardian of the bears in the amphitheatre; her mother was no better than she should be, like many connected with the stage and the circus. Into this professional household three daughters were born; the second, the future Empress, about the year 500.

Early in life Theodora came in contact with the people whom she was later to charm as an actress

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

before governing as Empress. Acacius had died leaving his widow and his three daughters in very straightened circumstances. To retain her late husband's position, the family's only means of support, the mother saw no better way than to take up with another man, who should obtain the guardianship of the bears, and thus look after both the family and the animals. But the success of her plan depended upon the consent of Asterius, the head of the Greens, and Asterius had accepted money to support a rival candidate. In order to overcome opposition, Theodora's mother thought she might be able to interest the people in her cause, and, one day when the crowd was assembled in the circus, she appeared in the arena thrusting before her her three little daughters, crowned with flowers, who held out their hands in supplication to the spectators. The Greens merely laughed at the touching request; but fortunately the Blues, who were always delighted to oppose their adversaries, hastened to grant the prayer which the Greens refused, and awarded Acacius's family an employment similar to that which it had lost. Theodora never forgot the scornful indifference with which the Greens had received her entreaties; and from that moment began in the child the tendency towards long-cherished rancour, and the implacable desire for vengeance, which became so strong in the woman.

Thus Theodora grew up in the casual society of the Hippodrome, and in the course of time was ready for her future career. The elder of her sisters had made a success on the stage, and Theodora followed in her footsteps. She went on the boards with her big

THEODORA

sister and played the part of lady's-maid; she also accompanied her to entertainments, where, in the mixed company of the more public apartments, she came across much impurity and indiscreet familiarity. Then she, in her turn, became a full-fledged actress; but she had no desire to be a flute-player, a singer, or a dancer, like so many others; she preferred to appear in living pictures, in which she could display undraped the beauty of which she was so proud, and in pantomimes wherein her vivacity and her feeling for comedy could have full scope.

She was pretty and rather small, but extraordinarily graceful; and her charming face, with its pale, creamy colouring, was lighted up by large, vivacious, sparkling eyes. Little of this all-powerful charm is left in her official picture in San Vitale at Ravenna. Beneath her imperial mantle she appears stiff and tall; under the diadem that hides her forehead her delicate small face, of a narrow oval shape, and her large, thin, straight nose, invest her with a sort of solemn gravity, almost with melancholy. One feature alone remains unaltered in this faded portrait, and that is the beautiful black eyes that Procopius speaks of, under the heavy, meeting eyebrows, which still illumine her face and seem almost to engulf it.

But Theodora had something else besides her beauty. She was intelligent, witty, and amusing; she had Bohemian high spirits which were often exerted at the expense of her fellow-actresses, and a pleasing and comic way with her that kept even the most volatile adorers firmly attached. She was not always kindly, and she did not stop at hard words if they would provoke a laugh; but when she wanted to

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

please, she knew how to put forth irresistible powers of fascination. Bold, enterprising, and audacious withal, she was not content to wait for favour to seek her out, but set forth consciously and joyously to provoke and encourage it; and having but little moral sense — it is difficult to see where she could have acquired it — as well as to a rare degree the perfect amorous temperament, she made an immediate success, both without and within the theatre. Belonging to a profession of which virtue is not a necessary attribute, she amused, charmed, and scandalised Constantinople. On the stage she indulged in the most audacious exhibitions and the most immodest effects. Off it she soon became celebrated for her wild suppers, her adventuresomeness, and the number of her lovers. Soon she became so compromised that respectable people passing her in the street drew aside lest they should sully themselves by contact with a creature so impure; and the very fact of meeting her was considered an ill omen. At this time she was not yet twenty years of age.

Suddenly she disappeared. She had a Syrian lover, Hecebolus by name, who was appointed governor of the African Pentapolis; Theodora decided to accompany him to his distant province. The romance, unfortunately, did not last long. For reasons unknown Hecebolus brutally sent her away, and penniless, without the necessities of life, the unfortunate Theodora for some time roamed all the East in misery. In Alexandria at last she settled down for a while, and her sojourn there was not without its effect upon her future. The capital of Egypt was not merely a great commercial centre, a rich and splendid

THEODORA

city, of loose habits, corrupt, the favourite abode of many celebrated courtesans. From the fourth century onwards it was also one of the capitals of Christianity. Nowhere else were religious quarrels more bitter, nor theological disputes more subtle and heated, nor fanaticism more easily excited; nowhere else had the memory of the great founders of the solitary life produced a richer flowering of monasteries, of mystics, and of ascetics. The suburbs of Alexandria were studded with religious houses, and the Libyan desert was so full of hermits as to be worthy of its name — “the Desert of the Saints.”

In her moral distress Theodora was not insensitive to the influence of the sphere into which circumstances had cast her. She approached such holy men as the Patriarch Timothy and Severus of Antioch, who preached especially to women; and it is not improbable that owing to them the penitent courtesan may, momentarily at least, have entered upon a purer and more Christian mode of life. By the time of her return to Constantinople she had become more sensible, more mature, and was weary of her wandering existence and of her wild adventures. Whether sincerely or not, she was careful to lead a more virtuous, retired life. According to one tradition she was very respectable and proper, and lived in an unpretentious little house, staying at home and spinning, like the matrons of good old Roman times. It was under these circumstances that she met Justinian. We cannot tell how she went about to enslave and hold this man, no longer young — he was nearly forty —, this politician in so delicate a situation, with a future which must not be compro-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

mised. Procopius talks of magic and philtres; but that really complicates matters too much, and leaves out of account the consummate intelligence, the easy grace, the humour and wit, with which Theodora had conquered so many hearts. Above all, it omits her clear, inflexible courage, that was to influence so powerfully her lover's feeble and undecided character. At all events, we know that the Prince was completely enslaved. Being madly in love, he refused his mistress nothing. She was fond of money, so he loaded her with wealth. She coveted honours and distinctions, so he persuaded his uncle, the Emperor, to raise her to the high rank of patrician. She was ambitious and keen for power, so he allowed himself to be swayed by her advice and was the docile instrument of her likes and of her hates. Soon he came to the point of insisting upon marriage. The good Emperor Justin was not worried by her lack of noble birth, and does not seem to have grudged his consent to his beloved nephew. The opposition to Justinian's scheme came from an unexpected quarter. In her peasant mind the broad common sense of the Empress Euphemia was shocked at the thought of having a Theodora as her successor; and, in spite of all her affection for her nephew, in spite of her usual compliance with his every wish, on this point she stood firm. Very fortunately, Euphemia died in 523, in the nick of time. Henceforth it was plain sailing. Senators and high dignitaries were forbidden by law to marry women of servile condition, innkeepers' daughters, actresses, or courtesans. To please Justinian, Justin abrogated the law. He went even further. When in April, 527, he associated his nephew with him

THEODORA

officially in the imperial power, Theodora shared in her husband's elevation and triumph. With him on Easter-day in St. Sophia, gleaming with candlelight, she was solemnly crowned. Afterwards, according to the custom of Byzantine sovereigns, she went to the Hippodrome and received the acclamations of the people in the place where she had made her first public appearance. Her dream had come true.

II

Such is the history of Theodora's youth; at least, that is how Procopius tells it; and for some two centuries and a half since the discovery of the manuscript of *The Secret History* this scandalous narrative has received almost universal credence. Must it therefore be accepted without reserve? A pamphlet is not history, and one may well inquire into the truth of these amazing adventures.

Gibbon declared long ago that no one would invent such incredible things, and that therefore they must be true. Of late years, on the other hand, intelligent scholars have at various times doubted the authority of Procopius's unsupported statements, and there has been serious talk of the "Theodora legend." Without wishing to reopen the question, or to belittle the value of some of the comments that have been made, I should hesitate to whitewash too thoroughly her whom *The Secret History* has so outrageously blackened. It is a pity that John, Bishop of Ephesus, who had access to Theodora and knew her well, should, out of respect for the great ones of the earth, have omitted to give us full particulars con-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

cerning the insults which the pious but brutally outspoken monks more than once, so he tells us, directed against the Empress. It is certain, at all events, that Procopius was not alone among her contemporaries in criticising her, and that there were persons attached to the imperial court, such as the secretary Priscus and the Praefect John of Cappadocia, who knew the joints in her armour. I do not know whether, as Procopius states, she really had a son in her youth, whose birth was due to an unfortunate accident; but it is certain, at all events, that she had a daughter of whom Justinian was not the father. This reminder of her stormy past does not seem, however, if we may judge by the success that this girl's son had at court, either to have worried the Empress very much, or to have troubled the Emperor. Certain of Theodora's characteristics fit in fairly well with the stories that are told about her youth: the interest she took in poor girls of the capital, who had been led astray, more often through want than through viciousness, and the steps she took to rescue these unfortunates and to free them, as a contemporary writer puts it, "from the yoke of their shameful slavery"; and also the rather contemptuous harshness with which she always treated men. And if all this that is undeniable is admitted, it will be impossible to reject *The Secret History* in its entirety.¹

¹ It must be added that in an unfortunately somewhat obscure passage in his *Lives of the Blessed Orientals*, John of Ephesus, who knew the Empress well, calls her rather brutally, but without otherwise seeming to cast reproach upon her, "Theodora the strumpet." If the translation 'εκ τοῦ πορνείου, by which Land renders the Syriac text, is accurate, the passage would confirm in one word the essence of what Procopius relates in such detail.

THEODORA

But are we therefore obliged to believe that Theodora's adventures had the blazing notoriety that Procopius invests them with; that she was, as in his account, a courtesan on the heroic scale, an angel of evil, whom the Devil permitted to go flaunting her lusts to and fro upon the earth? It must not be forgotten that Procopius has a habit of investing his characters with an almost epic perversity; and although he tries hard to determine to a hair's-breadth the lowest point to which Theodora fell, I for my part regard her — though her interest may thereby be diminished — as the heroine of a less extraordinary tale. She was a dancer who, having led the same life as the majority of her kind in all ages, tired suddenly of her precarious amours, and, finding a sensible man who could provide her with a home, settled down to married life and conjugal devotion — an adventuress, perhaps, but at the same time astute, quiet, and clever enough to be able to keep up appearances; one who could marry even a future Emperor without a fearful scandal. Ludovic Halévy, I know, created just such a character and named her Virginie Cardinal. But it is not this Theodora who is of importance to us. For there is another, a less well-known and far more interesting Theodora: a great Empress, closely associated in all Justinian's work, who often played a decisive part in the government, a woman of high courage, of exceptional intelligence, energetic, despotic, proud, violent and passionate, complex and baffling, but always extraordinarily fascinating.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

III

In the apse of San Vitale at Ravenna, glowing with golden mosaics, we may still see Theodora in all the splendour of her majesty. The costume she is wearing is of unparalleled magnificence. Clad in a long purple-violet mantle with a broad border of gold embroidery flowing in glistening folds, she wears on her aureoled head a lofty diadem of gold and precious stones; in and out through her hair are wound twisted strands of gems and pearls, while other jewels fall in sparkling streams upon her shoulders. Thus she appears in this official portrait to the eyes of posterity, and thus in her lifetime she desired to appear to her contemporaries. Seldom has upstart accustomed herself more rapidly to the exigencies of her newly-acquired majesty; seldom has high-born sovereign loved and appreciated more thoroughly the many pleasures, the delights of luxury, and the little gratifications of pride, which the exercise of supreme power can bestow. Very feminine, always elegant and eager to please, she loved sumptuous apartments, magnificent clothes, marvellous jewels, and an exquisite and delicate table. She took careful and constant care of her beauty. In order to keep her face calm and serene she lengthened her hours of sleep by endless siestas; to preserve the freshness of her complexion she took frequent baths followed by long hours of rest. For she felt that her charm was the surest guarantee of her influence.

Even more tenacious was she of the circumstances of power. She would have her own court, her own following, her own guards and processions; like the

THEODORA

upstart she was, she loved the complications of ceremonial, and added to them. To win her approval one had to be constantly paying court to her, to prostrate oneself at her feet, and to dance attendance interminably every day in her antechambers at her hours of audience. Her theatrical experience had given her a taste for stage-effects as well as the knowledge of how to obtain them; but above all, being very haughty, she insisted jealously upon her rank, and it doubtless gave her a secret delight to see so many great nobles, who in former days had treated her with more familiarity, bending low over her purple buskins.

It would be somewhat ingenuous, however, to imagine that all this display, this apparent insistence upon etiquette, must necessarily have excluded such adventures as those that Sardou has invented for his Theodora. It is certain that many mysterious things about which Justinian knew nothing could take place in the Imperial Gynaecium; the story of the Patriarch Anthemius which I have already related is proof of this. Nor would I be so foolish as to insist upon Theodora's post-marital virtue. Although, as is well known, it is always difficult to be certain on such points, I am not ready to believe that the Augusta's life was without reproach. I am fully convinced that during her youth she went the pace, and I do not feel called upon to be scandalised if she kept it up in later life; Justinian would have been the only person entitled to complain. But facts are facts and one must take them as one finds them.

Now, it is certain that no contemporary writers

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

nor any historians of a later age — and it is these last who have strongly censured Theodora for her cupidity, her despotic and violent temper, her excessive influence over Justinian, and the scandal to which her heterodox views gave rise —, not one of them records anything which casts doubt upon the correctness of her private life after her marriage. Even Procopius, who has so calumniated her, relating so fully the adventures of her youth, and telling with his notorious wealth of detail of her perfidies, her cruelties, and her infamies, as a grown woman, even he — however little attentively one may wish to read the text — does not hint at the shadow of an amorous adventure after her marriage on the part of this absolutely corrupt woman. I think it will be readily allowed that, if the Empress had given the slightest occasion, the pamphleteer would not have been backward in describing her adulteries in detail. He has told of nothing of the sort because there was really nothing to tell.

But this reflects no credit upon Theodora's moral qualities. Aside from the fact that she was no longer young when she ascended the throne — an Eastern woman at thirty is almost on the threshold of old age —, she was too intelligent and too ambitious to risk compromising by love-intrigues the position she had won for herself. Supreme power was worth taking some pains to preserve, and the dignity of her life reflects credit quite as much upon her common sense as upon her moral qualities. But chiefly, this courageous and ambitious woman, so eagerly desirous of power, had other interests than the pursuit of vulgar amours. She was endowed with several of the prin-

THEODORA

cial qualities which justify the striving for supreme power: a proud energy, a stern fixity of purpose, and a serene courage that never failed her even in the most difficult circumstances. It was owing to these qualities that, during the twenty-one years that she shared Justinian's throne, she exercised a profound — and legitimate — influence over her adoring husband.

IV

One incident that must never be forgotten in writing of Theodora is the part she played on that tragic 18th of January, 532, when the triumphant rebels stormed at the gates of the Imperial Palace, and the distracted Emperor completely lost his head and thought only of flight. Theodora was present at the council; in the midst of the general discouragement she alone was brave and self-controlled. At first she said nothing; suddenly, in the silence, she arose, disgusted with the universal cowardice, and recalled the wavering Emperor and his ministers to their duty. "If there were left me no safety but in flight, I would not fly" said she. "Those who have worn the crown should never survive its loss. Never will I see the day that I am not hailed Empress. If you wish to fly, Caesar, well and good; you have money, the ships are ready, the sea is clear; but I shall stay. For I love the old proverb that says: 'The purple is the best winding-sheet.'" On that day, when, to quote a contemporary, "the very Empire seemed upon the brink of destruction", Theodora saved Justinian's throne; and in this

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

supreme struggle, when her crown and her life were at stake, ambition inspired her to real heroism.

At this decisive moment Theodora, by her coolness and energy, shewed herself a statesman; and, as has been well said, she proved herself worthy of the place in the Imperial Council which until then she had owed to the Emperor's weakness. Henceforth she never lost it, and Justinian did not begrudge it her. To the very last he was passionately devoted to the woman he had adored in his younger days; and as he was completely under the influence of her superior intelligence and of her strong and resolute will, he never refused her anything, either the outward show or the real exercise of supreme power.

Upon the church walls of that time and over the gates of citadels Theodora's name may still be read alongside of the Emperor's; in San Vitale at Ravenna her portrait is a pendant to that of her imperial husband; and in the mosaics that decorated the apartments of the Sacred Palace Justinian had in like manner associated Theodora with him in connexion with his military triumphs and the brightest glories of his reign. The people erected statues to her, and officials did homage to her, as they did to Justinian, for throughout her life she was the equal of the Emperor. Upon the most momentous questions Justinian was pleased to take the advice of "the most reverend spouse whom God had given unto him", whom he loved to call "his sweetest delight"; and her contemporaries are unanimous in declaring that she used unscrupulously her boundless influence over the sovereign, and that her power was quite as great as his, and perhaps greater.

THEODORA

During the twenty-one years of her reign she interfered in everything; she filled the administration with her protégés; she meddled in diplomacy, in politics, and in the Church, and managed things to suit herself; she created and deposed popes and patriarchs, ministers and generals, as her fancy dictated; she was as eager to advance her favourites as she was to ruin the influence and power of her adversaries; nor did she even hesitate, whenever she thought proper, to countermand openly the sovereign's orders and substitute her own for them. In all matters of importance she was her husband's active assistant; and, although her influence was sometimes unfortunate, although her cupidity, her violence, and her pride, by arousing the pride and cupidity of the Emperor, inspired unwise acts, it must be remembered that she had often a truer insight than he into the interests of the State, and that the political ideas which she had at heart, if the times had permitted of their full realisation, would have solidified and strengthened the Byzantine Empire and perhaps even have altered the course of history.

Whereas Justinian, carried away by the splendour of Roman antiquity, revelled in fancies now magnificent, now hazy, dreaming of the restoration of the Empire of the Caesars and the triumph of Orthodoxy through union with Rome, Theodora, with a clearer and more penetrating vision, turned her eyes to the East. She had always been in sympathy with the monks of Syria and Egypt, such as Zooras, Jacobus Baradaeus, and many others, receiving them in the Palace, and entreating their prayers in spite of their ugly rags and their uncouth manners. Like all good

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Byzantines she was sincerely devout. But besides this she was too acute and had too keen a political sense not to understand the importance of religious questions in a Christian State, and the danger of ignoring them. Now, she felt that the rich and flourishing provinces of Asia, Syria, and Egypt, constituted the real strength of the monarchy; she realised the danger that was brewing for the Empire in the religious differences by which the peoples of the East from this time forth began to manifest their separatist tendencies; she felt the need of pacifying the dangerous unrest by opportune concessions and by broad toleration; and in trying to divert the imperial policy to the attainment of this end she may without paradox be considered to have shewn better judgement and a clearer insight into the future than her imperial colleague.

Whereas Justinian, a theologian at heart, gave up his time to religious questions out of a love of controversy, for the sterile pleasure of dogmatising, Theodora, by her realisation of the deep political problems which underlay the shifting and changing quarrels of the theologians, proved herself of the race of the great Byzantine Emperors. And that is why, in the interests of the State, she went on her way unswerving, openly protecting heretics, boldly challenging the Papacy, carrying the irresolute Justinian along with her, throwing herself with her whole soul into the struggle, and never acknowledging defeat. It was to her protection that heretic Egypt owed many years of toleration; it was through her that heretic Syria was able to put its persecuted national church upon a firm foundation; she it was who made it possible for

THEODORA

the dissenters first to be restored to favour and to resume freely the spreading of their doctrines, and afterwards to withstand the excommunications of many councils and the harshness of the secular arm; and it was to her that the Monophysite missions in Arabia, Nubia, and Abyssinia owed their success. To the day of her death she kept up a tenacious, impassioned struggle for her beliefs, like a statesman, and yet like a true woman. She could be yielding or brutal according to circumstances; she had the boldness to cause the arrest and deposition of one Pope, and the ability to bend another to her will; she had the courage to protect her persecuted friends and to furnish them with the means of reforming their church, and the adroitness often to make the Emperor carry out her policies whether he would or no.

The Church has never pardoned Theodora the brutal deposition of Pope Silverius, nor the tenacity with which she clung to Monophysitism, nor the overbearing violence with which she settled scores with ecclesiastics — with Vigilius in particular. Century after century, ecclesiastical historians have hurled curses and insults at her. But Theodora is worthy of being judged with less violence and more justice. Doubtless she carried out her plans with a too passionate eagerness, a too imperious brutality, a too obstinate rancour, even with a too cold-blooded cruelty; but she had great gifts as well: she was keenly alive to the needs of the government and saw clearly what was capable of accomplishment. The policy she had at heart does honour to her clarity of vision, and, taken all in all, was worthy of an Emperor.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

V

But her great interest lies in the fact that under her statesmanlike qualities Theodora was a woman. She shews it by her love of luxury and elegance, and much more by the fierceness of her passions and the strength of her hates. When her interests were at stake, she had no hesitations and no scruples. Mercilessly she got rid of everyone whose influence might outweigh her own; pitilessly she broke all whose ambition shewed signs of affecting her power or of undermining her influence. To avenge herself and to preserve her power she would stoop to anything, force and craft, falsehood and bribery, intrigue and violence. And if she felt at times that the feeble Justinian was escaping from her grasp, if circumstances and influences beyond her control caused her momentarily to give way, she always contrived by means of her audacity and her pliancy to stage a striking revenge; ambitious and subtle, she always insisted upon having the last word on everything — and she always succeeded.

The gossips of Constantinople told dark stories of secret executions at Theodora's orders, of underground dungeons, of prisons, silent and terrible, where her victims were incarcerated and tortured. One must be careful not to take these tales too literally. Some of the Empress's most illustrious victims did not fare so badly on the whole, and succeeded, in spite of short periods of disgrace, in making creditable careers for themselves; it is a fact, moreover, that her most dangerous adversaries were sent not to death but merely into exile.

THEODORA

But, without enlarging unnecessarily the list of her cruelties, one must not make Theodora out too merciful and too good. When she hated, she was not the sort of woman to stop at anything, whether at the scandal of an unjust disgrace, or even, perhaps, at an assassination. The stories of the Emperor's nephew Germanus, of Priscus the secretary, and of Photius, the son-in-law of Belisarius, are enough to shew the strength of her hatred. The fall of the Praefect John of Cappadocia, the bold and formidable minister who held her in his grip for a moment and made her fear for her power, illustrates even better the unscrupulous energy of her ambitious soul and the incredible resources of her perfidy. In like manner, and by a similar mixture of adroitness and violence, she made so great a general as Belisarius pay for his rare outbursts of independence, and through her ascendancy over Antonia, the patrician's wife, contrived to make him her very humble and docile servant. Here again one is forced to admire both the Empress's great ingenuity in managing an intrigue, and her carelessness of the means and instruments employed. Antonia, after a stormy youth, constantly deceived her doting husband; but she was astute and bold, consummate in intrigue, and capable, says Procopius, who knew her well, of accomplishing the impossible. Theodora quickly saw that by veiling this woman's love-affairs she could make her the devoted slave of her schemes and the best guarantee of Belisarius's fidelity. They formed an alliance. Antonia put all her cleverness at the Basilissa's disposal, and in the deposition of Pope Silverius, as well as in the disgrace of John of Cappadocia, played an important part,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and demonstrated the extent of her ability. In return, Theodora covered up all her follies and her slips, and on several occasions reconciled her to Belisarius and made him pardon her. And thus, having her favourite at her mercy, the Empress through her kept the general under her thumb.¹

From the favour she shewed Antonia, must we conclude, with *The Secret History*, that Theodora tolerated women's failings and concealed many lapses under her imperial robe? The facts give a contrary impression. It may be that, owing to her high-handed impulses and her habit of subordinating everything to her schemes, Theodora did at times interfere indiscreetly in the family affairs of others, and arranged marriages in the same despotic way that she governed the State. But by the laws which she caused to be made on divorce and adultery, as well as by her actions, she shewed a constant interest in strengthening the ties of marriage — "that holiest of all things", as a law of the period terms it —, and in making this lawful and holy estate respected by everyone. The truth is that she was, as an historian says, "naturally anxious to help unfortunate women", and this anxiety is shewn in the measures she caused to be adopted with regard to women who were badly treated or unhappily married, and also in those which she advised for comedy-actresses and fallen women. She knew from experience the slums of the capital, and realised all the misery and shame that they contained; and early in her reign used her in-

¹ Upon these two incidents the reader may consult two chapters in my book previously cited: "Théodora et Jean de Cappadoce," pp. 173-90, and "Théodora et Bélisaire," pp. 191-216.

THEODORA

fluence to improve them. But she was none the less very strict, a watchful guardian of public morals, and she undertook the task of making her capital purer and more moral.¹

Are we to believe that some memory of her own experiences and a measure of sorrow for her past were responsible for these measures? On the whole it is probable, if not certain; and it cannot but enhance our opinion of her. There is a singular nobility in the following words from an imperial edict, which she undoubtedly inspired: "We have set up magistrates to punish robbers and thieves; are we not even more straitly bound to prosecute the robbers of honour and the thieves of chastity?"

It would indeed be puerile to try to conceal Theodora's defects and vices. She loved money and she loved power; she shewed perhaps too much family affection in providing for her relatives, and, in order to preserve the throne she had ascended, she was unscrupulous, perfidious, violent, cruel, implacable, bitter, and adamant, to those who had incurred her hatred. She was a woman of great ambition, who by her intrigues troubled the Palace and the Empire profoundly. But she had her good qualities as well. Her friends called her "the faithful Empress", and she deserved the name. She had other, more eminent virtues: a masculine vigour, a lofty energy, and a statesman's clear and powerful intelligence. Her influence was not always good; but she made a deep impress upon Justinian's government. After her death there followed a period of decadence in which the once-glorious reign drew sadly to a close.

¹ See the chapter, "Le Féminisme de Théodora," pp. 217-230, in my book.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

When on the 29th of June, 548, Theodora, after a long illness, died of cancer, Justinian mourned bitterly a loss which he rightly felt to be irreparable. During her lifetime he had adored her, and after her death he piously treasured her memory. As a memorial to her he desired to keep in his service all who had been near her; many years later, whenever he wished to make a solemn promise, he was in the habit of swearing by the name of Theodora, and those who desired to please him would talk to him about "the excellent, beautiful, and wise sovereign" who, after helping him faithfully in this world, was now praying to God for her husband.

It must be admitted that this apotheosis is somewhat excessive. Theodora the dancer did not have precisely those virtues which carry one straight to Paradise. Theodora the Empress, in spite of her piety, was possessed of faults and vices hardly consistent with the haloes of the saints. But the point is worthy of notice, for it shews the incomparable fascination and charm that this very ambitious, but thoroughly feminine, woman was able to exert even from beyond the grave.

IV
I R E N E

TOWARDS the end of the year 768, Constantinople was in festive array; the Byzantine capital was celebrating the marriage of the heir apparent of the Empire, Leo, son of Constantine V.

On the morning of November 1st, a flotilla of boats, sumptuously spread with brilliant silks, had gone to the Palace of Hieria, on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus to fetch the young bride across for her solemn entry into Byzantium. Several weeks later, on the 18th of December, in the triclinium of the Augustaeum in the Sacred Palace, before the assembled court, the two Basileis had crowned the new sovereign. Seated on golden thrones, Constantine and his son, in the presence of the Patriarch, had lifted the veil that hid the face of the future Empress, had vested her with the silken chlamys over her long golden robe, had set the crown upon her head, and had fastened the jewelled pendants in her ears. Then, in St. Stephen's Church, the new Augusta had received the homage of the high officials of the monarchy; from the terrace of the Hall of the Nineteen Couches she had shewn herself to the people and had been acclaimed by them. Lastly, she had returned to St. Stephen's, with her brilliant following of patricians,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

senators, cubicularies, and maids of honour, and there the Patriarch Nicetas had solemnized the marriage, and had placed the nuptial crown upon the heads of bride and bridegroom.

The old Emperor Constantine V, that energetic iconoclast, never dreamt when he arranged these festivities and when he set the diadem of the Caesars upon the young woman's head, that this delicate Basilissa was to destroy his life's work and lose the throne for his dynasty.

I

Like Athenais-Eudocia, Irene was by birth an Athenian; like her, she was an orphan, when circumstances of which we know nothing, and in which her beauty was doubtless the essential factor, made her an Emperor's daughter-in-law. But there the resemblance between the two Princesses stops. Athens in the eighth century was wholly different from what it had been in the fifth. It was no longer the home of pagan letters, a university town, full of the glory of ancient writers and the memory of illustrious philosophers. It no longer preserved religiously the memory of its exiled gods in the shadow of its temples. In the time of Irene it was a pious, quiet, little provincial town, where the Parthenon had been converted into a church, where St. Sophia had driven Pallas-Athene from the Acropolis, and where the saints had replaced the gods. In such surroundings, education, and, above all, feminine education, could no longer be what it had been in Athenais's time. Like the majority of her contemporaries, Irene was devout and pious, with an intense, burning piety, that was

I R E N E

aggravated by the events of the troubled times in which she lived.

A serious religious conflict had been disturbing the Byzantine Empire for more than forty years, and the struggle, called the Iconoclastic Controversy, was now at its height. The strictly theological nature of the term must not blind one to the real character of this formidable crisis; it was quite other than a mere trifling question of discipline or worship. Undoubtedly the Iconoclastic Emperors, devout as were all the men of their age, were inspired by the most ardent and sincere religious motives; one of the objects of their reform was to raise the moral plane of religion by stripping it of such a renaissance of paganism as the excessive veneration of the images of the Virgin and the saints seemed to them to be. Another point troubled them even more: above all else, they were dismayed at the power that the monks, the chief defenders of the images, had, by their wealth and influence, acquired in the State. Beginning with the eighth century, there was in fact — strange as it may appear in so Christian an Empire as Byzantium — a struggle between the State and the monks.

Against the latter the Emperor Constantine V, a passionate, violent, energetic man, had carried on the war with peculiar severity. By his orders, brutal and often terrible executions had taken place. The monasteries had been secularised, and the religious driven out, imprisoned, or exiled. Constantinople had scarcely any monks left in it. All Byzantine society had joined in the struggle in one or the other camp. On one side was officialdom: the court

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

clergy, the functionaries, the upper classes, and the army, utterly devoted to so victorious a general as Constantine V. On the other side were the lower clergy, the middle classes, the people, and the women, whose mystical piety was enthralled by the splendours of ritual, whose devotion was kindled by the magnificence of the churches, and who could not bring themselves to give up the miraculous and venerated icons.

Irene was a woman, and came besides from a province ardently devoted to the images. Her sympathies were thus not to be doubted. But at the time when she became a member of the imperial family the persecution was at its height, and it would not have been wise for her to shew too decided an opposition in the neighbourhood of the formidable Constantine V. Irene, therefore, carefully dissimulated her real beliefs. She even, at her father-in-law's request, went to the extent of swearing a solemn oath never to accept image-worship; and at this moment some part of her lying and unscrupulous spirit, later to shew itself so forcibly, makes its appearance.

However, despite this apparent submissiveness, the young woman's piety was not without its results. This became clear when, in 775, upon the death of Constantine V, the new Emperor, Leo IV, perhaps under Irene's influence, which was very great at the beginning of his reign, relaxed to some extent the former penalties. The Basilissa was determined. Many women harboured the proscribed images; it is said that in the Palace itself Anthusa, a daughter of Constantine V, fearlessly kept up her devotion to the forbidden icons. Irene imagined she could imi-

I R E N E

tate her sister-in-law, and fancied she might be able to restore the prohibited worship secretly in the imperial residence. Her attempt was destined to a tragic outcome. In April, 780, several of the Empress's intimate friends were arrested and put to torture by order of Leo IV, under suspicion of Iconodule sympathies. The Basilissa herself was compromised. It was reported that one day her husband discovered in her apartments two images of saints hidden under the cushions. At sight of them he became violently angry; and although Irene, who was always ready to swear to anything, vowed she had no idea who had put them there, her influence with the Emperor was seriously impaired. She was in a sort of disgrace when, happily for her, Leo IV died suddenly in September of the same year. The heir to the throne, Constantine VI, was a child of ten; and Irene, his governor and regent, was Empress.

II

Few historical personages are more difficult to estimate correctly than the celebrated sovereign who restored Orthodoxy in Byzantium. She is known to have been beautiful; there is every reason to believe that she was chaste, and that, although thrown while still in her youth into a corrupt and dangerous court, she always kept herself above reproach. And, lastly, she was devout. But besides this what do we know of Irene? What was the temper of her mind? What was her character? The acts of her government, to be sure, give us glimpses; but were these acts the result of her own will? During her reign, did she

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

have ideas of her own, or was she only an instrument in the hands of astute advisers? These are a few of the difficult problems to be decided, and they are the more difficult from the fact that the writers of her time exhaust all the expressions of unbounded admiration in speaking of this devout, orthodox Princess.

It would be possible, by following their lead, to describe Irene in the most flattering terms; and some writers of our own times have not failed to do so. A celebrated novelist who amused himself in his younger days by making a sketch of this most pious Empress, and who has just portrayed her more fully in a picturesque and masterly novel,¹ describes her as initiated into the mysteries of Platonic philosophy, into the dogmas of "cosmopolitan Hermetism", as knowing "the power-bestowing theurgical incantations", and as using this power, when she had mastered it, for one end alone, the greatness of Byzantium and the restoration of the ancient hegemony of the Roman Empire. Let him who would see her through the eyes of Paul Adam read this: "Seated beneath the imperial canopy at the extreme point of the promontory overlooking the rapid waters of the Bosphorus, she spent her evenings under the deathless beauty of the Levantine sky watching her reflection in the polished metal basins, splendid as the Mother of God in the shrine-like majesty of her garments that caught the glimmer of the twinkling stars in every facet of their matchless jewels. Thoughts of victory thrilled within her. She called to mind the mysterious teachings of the schools. The love of making a people vibrate to the breath of her

¹ Paul Adam, *Irène et les eunuques*, Paris, 1906.

I R E N E

soul left her panting and exhausted.”¹ And such is the author’s sympathy for this remarkable woman that her very crime finds excuse in his eyes, and seems to him almost justified. She dethroned her son and had him blinded, says the novelist, “because she preferred to suppress the individual for the benefit of the race. And she was absolutely right.”²

These, of course, are poetic imaginings. But even serious historians have portrayed Irene in no less seductive guise. One praises her talents, her great ability, her resourcefulness, her clear-sightedness, and her force of character.³ Another regards her as an altogether remarkable woman, who gave the Byzantine Empire “the best and most reconstructive government that it probably ever had.” And he adds: “She was a woman really born to rule, for she had a masculine intellect, she was admirably endowed with all the qualities of a great sovereign, she knew how to speak to the people and make them love her; she was excellent in her choice of advisers, and was possessed of perfect courage and admirable presence of mind.”⁴

I must confess that to me Irene is much less attractive. She was overwhelmingly ambitious — her admirers remark that her dominating characteristic was the love of power (*τὸ φιλαρχον*) —, and all her life she was devoured by a consuming passion, the desire to rule. She was young and beautiful; but she never took a lover for fear of acquiring a master. She was a mother; but ambition stamped out even

¹ Paul Adam, *Princesses byzantines*, pp. 33-4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³ A. Gasquet, *L'Empire byzantin et la monarchie franque*, pp. 252, 287.

⁴ G. Schlumberger, *Les Iles des Princes*, p. 112.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

her maternal affection. To attain her self-appointed ends she allowed no scruples to stand in her way; she considered all means worthy, dissimulation and intrigue, cruelty and treachery. She directed all the powers of her mind and all the strength of her pride towards one single object, the throne. And this was her entire life. Even her very real and deep piety helped her ambitious schemes; for it was a narrow, superstitious piety, which made her fancy that she was God's chosen instrument, that she had a work to accomplish in the world, a work that she must defend and never permit others to overthrow. She thus successfully combined religious promptings with ambition and love of power; and, being consequently always convinced that she was in the right, and certain of her duty, she pressed sincerely on to her goal without pausing at any obstacle or allowing any difficulty to turn her aside from the path. She was proud and passionate, violent, brutal, and cruel; she was tenacious and obstinate, and followed up her schemes with extraordinary and untiring perseverance. She was subtle and dissembling, and brought an unprecedented resourcefulness and an incomparable genius for plotting and intrigue to the fulfillment of her designs. There is, decidedly, an element of grandeur in this familiar habit of supreme power which ultimately gains a complete mastery of the soul and so transforms it that all natural feeling is abolished and nothing is left but ambition.

It is well to bear in mind that, as regards externals, Irene was admirably suited to the part of a woman of great ambition. She was majestic, she had the dramatic sense, she loved splendour and

I R E N E

magnificence, and she loved to build; in all of which she reveals her femininity. In addition, her friends maintain that she governed well, that the people loved her and regretted her downfall, and that her reign was an era of unmixed prosperity. We shall see presently what to think of this praise. In any case, I am unable to distinguish the great intelligence, the vigorous intellect, the masculine courage, and the strength of soul in adversity, that her adherents attribute to the Empress. One thing that makes me doubt her statesmanlike qualities and her clearness of insight is the fact that she was always too quick to think she had succeeded, and that several times she encountered obstacles which she ought to have foreseen. She was able and powerful, perhaps, at intrigue; but in her methods of operation I see rather a petty trickiness and slyness, which, while it sometimes undoubtedly succeeded, in no way implies genius. I grant that she was pertinacious, and that she kept hammering at obstructions until she had broken them down. But, in spite of her much-vaunted greatness of soul (*τὸ κραταιόφρον*) and masculine spirit (*τὸ ἀρρενωπὸν φρόνημα*), she appears to me neither truly energetic nor really brave.

In 797, when she was on the point of carrying out the *coup d'état* which overthrew her son, she lost her head at the critical moment; she took fright, thought of humiliating herself, believed the business had miscarried, and wanted to abandon the whole project. In 802, when some conspirators brought about her own downfall, she allowed herself to be dethroned without even attempting resistance. She was weak in defeat, and in victory pitiless. The treatment she

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

inflicted on her son makes it superfluous to mention her heart. Undoubtedly she did some great things during the twenty-odd years of her reign: she dared bring about a political and religious revolution of unparalleled importance. But she herself had neither greatness of soul nor greatness of will.

But, whatever Irene was like, the times in which she lived still remain strangely interesting and dramatic. As has been truly said: "In all Byzantine history, full as it is of incredible events, the reign of Irene is perhaps one of the most astonishing." ¹

III

When the death of Leo IV gave into Irene's hands the substance of supreme power, there were many rival ambitions in the field. At court she was confronted by the silent hostility of her brothers-in-law, the five sons of Constantine V, popular and ambitious men, from whom she had everything to fear. Their father, before he died, had vainly made them swear never to conspire against the legitimate sovereign; as soon as Leo IV had ascended the throne they had broken their oaths; and even though, after this attempt, the eldest of them, the Caesar Nicephorus, had been stripped of his dignities and exiled to far-off Cherson, a numerous following undertook to work on their behalf. Moreover, all the chief posts in the government were occupied by zealous Iconoclasts. The Master of the Offices, or Chancellor, and the Domestic of the Scholae, or Commander-in-Chief of the Army, were old and tried servants of the dead

¹ E. Molinier, *Histoire des arts appliqués à l'industrie*, tome i, p. 84.

I R E N E

Basileus Constantine V. The Senate and the high provincial officials were no less devoted to the policies of the preceding reign. The Church, under the administration of the Patriarch Paul, was full of enemies of the images. With such men Irene could undertake nothing, while they in their turn rightly suspected the Basilissa's tendencies, and feared lest she should attempt some reactionary measures. To realise her pious projects and her ambitious dreams the Empress would have to look elsewhere for advice and support.

And here appears her skill in preparing the way. Some of her opponents she broke mercilessly by sheer force; others she ousted more gently from positions where they hampered her. A plot having been formed to elevate the Caesars to the throne, she grasped the opportunity to force them into holy orders; and, so that no one should be in ignorance of their final downfall, she compelled them to take part in the solemn Christmas services of the year 780 in St. Sophia, in the presence of all the people of the capital. At the same time, she little by little changed the personnel of the Palace. She advanced her own family, and gave positions to her brother, her nephew, a female cousin, and other relatives. She disgraced Constantine V's old generals, in particular the terrible Michael Lachanodraco, Strategus of the Thracians, who had made himself notorious by his savage hatred of the monks, and by his jovial brutality in forcing marriage upon them. Their places she filled with her own creatures, particularly with the eunuchs of her household, who were her especial friends. It was to them that she entrusted all the great offices in

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

the Palace and in the administration, and it was from their number that she finally selected her Prime Minister, Stauracius.

This man, the Basilissa's chief favourite, became patrician and Logothete of the Dromos, and was soon the acknowledged and all-powerful master in the Sacred Palace. As diplomatist he negotiated a peace with the Arabs; as general he crushed the Slavic rebellion; and to enhance his prestige still further Irene allowed him a solemn triumph in the Hippodrome. The army, discontented under such a commander, vainly manifested its hatred of the upstart; he was certain of the Empress's favour, and increased in pride and insolence. Indeed, he attached himself faithfully for twenty years to Irene's fortunes, always falling with her, and with her returning to power. And perhaps this energetic, active, ambitious man, whose merits cannot be denied, often directly inspired the sovereign's measures; but it is obvious what a private character — of the nature of a *camarilla* — this seizure of all the machinery of the administration by the eunuchs of the household gave from the outset to Irene's government.

Irene, while filling the public services with new men, modified the general policy of the Empire. She brought to an end the war in the East, and in the West sought a reconciliation with the Papacy, and began negotiations for an alliance with Charlemagne. Above all, she restored a long-abandoned policy of toleration. "Pious men", says a contemporary chronicler, "began to speak freely; once more the Word of God could spread without hindrance; those who sought eternal salvation could retire unmolested

I R E N E

from the world, and God's glory was once more celebrated; the monasteries flourished again, and prosperity was universal." Monks reappeared in Constantinople, and the cloisters were opened at last to many who had long been forbidden to have vocations. The Empress ostentatiously took measures to repair the sacrileges of the former régime; she went in great pomp to restore to St. Sophia the valuable crown that Leo IV had removed, and she replaced solemnly in their sanctuary the relics of St. Euphemia, which had been thrown into the sea by order of Constantine V and miraculously recovered. The religious party was delighted at these developments, greeting the accession of this pious sovereign as an unexpected miracle; and they gave thanks to God who "by the hand of a widow and a fatherless child would now overthrow sacrilege and put an end to the Church's enslavement."

An ably-managed intrigue gave into Irene's hands the only power she lacked — the Patriarchate. Suddenly, in 784 — without consulting the government, says Theophanes, though it is more probable that the suggestion emanated from the Palace — the Patriarch Paul resigned his office and retired to a monastery, declaring to all who cared to listen that he was full of remorse for his sins, and desirous of expiating his crimes against the images, in the hope at least of dying at peace with God. This decision of his, which made a great stir in the capital, Irene very cleverly exploited; and in Paul's place chose the imperial secretary Tarasius, a layman, a man she was sure of, to be head of the Church. He was an astute, pliable politician, who played admirably the part the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

sovereign had doubtless mapped out for him. When his name was proposed, and when the Empress herself begged him to accept the nomination and allow himself to be elected, he refused, declining the charge which he was asked to undertake and requesting permission to explain to the people the reasons for his refusal. In a long discourse he reviewed in detail the deplorable condition of the Church, the discords that rent it, and the schism that separated it from Rome, and, very adroitly, naming it as the price of his acceptance, launched the idea of an Oecumenical Council to restore peace and concord to the Christian world. At the same time, by a clever side-thrust, he disavowed the Iconoclastic synod held in 753, denying that it had any canonical authority, on the ground that it had done nothing but register illegally-promulgated decrees of the civil authority concerning the Church. And, having thus prepared the way for the Basilissa's schemes, he finally gave in, received all the sacred orders at one and the same time, and ascended the patriarchal throne.

Provided with so valuable an ally, Irene felt able to throw aside the mask. Writs were sent throughout the Empire calling upon the prelates of Christendom to meet in Constantinople during the spring of 786; for the Empress was sure of victory. But she had left out of account the opposition of certain of the bishops, as well as that of the regiments of the Imperial Guard, which was faithful to the memory of Constantine V, and firmly attached to the policy of that glorious Emperor. The error was obvious from the moment the Council opened in the Church of the Holy Apostles. The bishops were solemnly seated in

I R E N E

their chairs; Irene and her son were in the Porch of the Catechumens; Plato, Abbot of Sakkudion, one of the most ardent defenders of the images, had the floor and was delivering an appropriate homily, when suddenly the soldiers, sword in hand, burst into the church and threatened the prelates with death. Irene, not lacking in courage, tried in vain to interpose and calm the uproar: her efforts were useless and her authority unrecognised. The Orthodox bishops were insulted, hustled, and driven out, seeing which the Iconoclastic bishops joined with the army, applauding and crying: "We have won! We have won!" Irene herself escaped not without some difficulty "from the lion's claws", as an ecclesiastical chronicler says; and though she was unscathed, her partisans ostentatiously proclaimed her a martyr.

She had gone too fast, and all was to do over again. This time a tortuous policy was adopted. The Basilissa and her Prime Minister brought to the task all their wiles and all their capacity for intrigue. The government by money and promises won over the Asiatic army-corps, which were always jealous of the troops on garrison-duty in the capital. A great expedition against the Arabs was then announced. The guard-regiments were the first to leave for the front, and they were immediately replaced in Constantinople by divisions whose fidelity was assured. At the same time, in order to force the recalcitrants to obedience, the wives and children of the soldiers in the field were arrested, and their property seized. With these precious hostages in their hands the government were able without danger to break, furlough, and disband the ill-disposed guard-regiments.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Irene had now the necessary support for her schemes — namely, an army of men of her own choosing under leaders devoted to her. Nevertheless, having her failure of 786 in mind, she did not risk reopening the Oecumenical Council in Constantinople itself. It met, in 787, at Nicaea; and under the all-powerful influence of the court, the Patriarch, and the monks, it unhesitatingly anathematized the Iconoclastic decisions of 753, and completely re-established image-worship and Orthodoxy. Then, in November, 787, the Fathers crossed over to Constantinople, and at a last solemn session in the Palace of Magnaura, Irene, in the presence of Pope Hadrian's legates, subscribed her name to the canons that restored her cherished beliefs.

Thus, by seven years of patient skill, Irene had, in spite of some precipitancy, made herself all-powerful. She had gratified the Church and her own piety; above all, she had crushed under foot everything that interfered with her ambition. And her friends, the religious party, proud of such a sovereign, hailed her pompously as "the Christ-supporting Empress, whose government, like her name, is token of peace" (*χριστοφόρος Ειρήνη, ἡ φερωνύμως βασιλεύσασα*).

IV

At the very moment that Irene was winning this victory, when her triumph seemed most complete, her ambition was seriously threatened.

Constantine VI was growing up; he was seventeen years of age. Between the son, eager to reign, and

I R E N E

the mother, passionately desirous of supreme power, a conflict was inevitable; and it was destined to surpass in horror anything that can be imagined. Accordingly, the pious historians of the period are unable to account for this infamous struggle except by diabolical inspiration; and in their anxiety to excuse the most devout Empress, have so far as possible cast the blame for her misdeed upon her sinister counsellors. But these excuses will not stand investigation: from what we know of Irene it is certain that she was fully aware of her actions and was completely responsible for them. She was bound to safeguard the work that had just been accomplished, and to retain her usurped power: to do so she halted neither at strife nor at crime.

Irene, domineering and passionate, continued to treat her son like a child. At the beginning of her reign, from political motives, she had begun negotiations for a marriage between Constantine VI and one of Charlemagne's daughters; and a palace eunuch had been dispatched to Aix-la-Chapelle to instruct the young Rotrude in the language and customs of her future country; the learned men of Charlemagne's Palatine Academy, in their pride at the prospective alliance, were inspired with a longing to learn Greek. But politics undid what they had done. After peace had been re-established with Rome, the Frankish alliance seemed less necessary to Irene; it is said that she feared chiefly lest the mighty Charles should become too strong a support to his son-in-law and help him be master of the Empire. Thus she abandoned the cherished plan, and in spite of Constantine's protests — for he had conceived from afar an

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

affection for the young Western Princess — forced another marriage upon him. I have already given the charming tale out of the *Life of St. Philaret* of how the imperial envoys, according to established custom, travelled throughout the provinces to discover a bride worthy of the Basileus, and how, from among the candidates for Constantine's hand, Irene and her minister chose a young Armenian girl from the Paphlagonian Theme, Mary of Amnia. She was pretty, intelligent, and devout, and came, moreover of an unpretending family; above all, Irene felt that she would submit with docility to her benefactress's wishes, and that from such a daughter-in-law she need have no fear of inconvenient ambitions. The marriage was thus determined upon, and Constantine, in spite of himself, had to obey. This was in November, 788.

Irene, furthermore, was careful to keep her son out of all public business. The Emperor was practically isolated in his own court, without friends or influence; while the all-powerful Stauracius, on the other hand, insolent and haughty, governed as he chose, and everyone humbled himself before the favourite. At last the young Emperor revolted against this tutelage; and with some of his intimates conspired against the Prime Minister. But misfortune overtook him. The plot was discovered, and Irene realised at once that she had been directly threatened. From that day forth ambition stifled her maternal affection. She retaliated brutally. The conspirators were tortured, exiled, or cast into prison; the Emperor himself was beaten with rods, like a disobedient child, roundly rebuked by his mother, and kept for several

I R E N E

days in close confinement. After this the Empress thought herself safe. Her flatterers also encouraged her illusion, proclaiming that "even God did not wish her son to reign." Being superstitious and credulous, like all her contemporaries, she allowed herself to be convinced by their words and by soothsayers who promised her the throne; and, in order to make sure of it, she risked everything upon a single throw. The army was asked to take a new oath of allegiance, and the soldiers were obliged to swear in the following unusual way: "So long as thou shalt live we will never recognise thy son as Emperor"; and henceforth, in the official acclamations, Irene's name was put before Constantine's.

As in 786, so again this time, the eager and ambitious Princess had proceeded too quickly. In 790, a manifesto was suddenly issued by the Asiatic regiments in favour of the young Emperor. The revolt spread from the Armeniac army-corps to the other themes, and soon all the troops gathered together and demanded that Constantine VI should be set at liberty and recognised as the one and only Basileus. Irene was frightened and gave in. She consented to free her son and abdicate; raging but powerless, she witnessed the disgrace of her closest friends. Stauracius, the Prime Minister, was tonsured and exiled to Armenia, and Aëtius, another of her intimates, shared his downfall. She herself was obliged to retire to her magnificent Eleutherian Palace, and she beheld in the enjoyment of the favour of the young Prince, now solemnly proclaimed, all those whom she had fought, all the enemies of the images that she had restored. Among the foremost was old

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Michael Lachanodraco, on whom was bestowed the high dignity of Master of the Offices.

But Constantine VI bore no grudge against his mother. Hardly a year had elapsed since Irene's downfall, when, in January, 792, the young monarch granted her petitions, restored to her the title of Empress, brought her back to the Sacred Palace, and associated her in the government. At the same time the Basileus weakly recalled her favourite, Stauracius. Irene returned thirsting for vengeance, determined to punish those who had betrayed her, and more eager than ever to fulfil her ambitious desires. But this time she acted more circumspectly. In 790 she had been too certain of success; she had wished to hurry matters and win the throne at one stroke, and by her cruelty towards her son had scandalised public opinion and caused the army to revolt. Her failure taught her to be more careful; this time she took five long years in the slow preparation of her triumph by the most subtle and ingenious intrigues.

Constantine VI had undoubted qualities. Like his grandfather he was brave, energetic, intelligent, and capable; his very adversaries praise him, recognising his merits as a soldier and his aptitude for government. The accusations brought against him, chiefly that of debauchery, are not to be taken as literally as one might imagine, for in the minds of their authors they are all inspired by the scandal of his second marriage. His orthodoxy being beyond dispute, he was extremely popular with the lower classes and in good odour with the Church; and as he was a brave and active general, quite willing to resume hostilities against the Bulgarians and the

I R E N E

Arabs, he satisfied the army. It was Irene's master-stroke to embroil this estimable sovereign with all his best friends in turn, to make him appear at once ungrateful, cruel, and cowardly, to lose him the goodwill of the army, to turn popular feeling against him, and, finally, to ruin him with the Church.

Her first use of the influence which she had regained was to excite Constantine's suspicions against Alexius Muselé, the general who had issued the manifesto of 790; him she managed to compromise so thoroughly that the Emperor disgraced and imprisoned him, and then had him blinded. This was a double victory for Irene, for she not only revenged herself upon the man who had betrayed her confidence, but also stirred up against Constantine his best support, the Armeniac troops. At the same time, since there was still a party that continued to plot on behalf of his uncles, the Caesars, the Emperor, on Irene's advice, sentenced the eldest to be blinded and had the tongues of the four others cut out — a useless cruelty, that made him very unpopular, especially with the Iconoclasts, who cherished in the persons of the victims the memory of their father, Constantine V. Finally, in order to arouse public opinion against her son, the Empress devised one last scheme, the most Machiavellian of all.

Constantine VI, as is well known, did not love his wife, although she had borne him two daughters, Euphrosyne and Irene; and he kept mistresses. After Irene's return to the Palace he soon developed a lively affection for one of the Empress-mother's maids of honour. Her name was Theodota; she belonged to one of the great families of the capital,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and was related to some of the most celebrated men of the Orthodox party, Plato, Abbot of Sakkudion, and his nephew Theodore. Irene complacently encouraged her son's passion for her lady-in-waiting, and it was she herself who urged him to divorce his wife and marry the young girl; for she knew quite well the scandal that such a step would arouse, and the help it would afford to her plans. Constantine listened eagerly to her advice; and there then began in the Palace a very curious intrigue to get rid of Mary — an intrigue to which I must later return, for it is altogether characteristic of contemporary Byzantine customs. In the end, despite the Patriarch's opposition, the Emperor put his wife in a convent, and, in September, 795, married Theodota.

Irene's expectations were realised. From all Byzantine Christendom, even from the farthest provinces, there went up a cry of horror at this adulterous marriage. The religious party were utterly scandalised and made an uproar; the monks, fanning the flame, thundered against the debauched, bigamous Emperor, and clamoured at the weakness of Tarasius, the Patriarch, who, with characteristic diplomacy, allowed such abominations to exist. Irene quietly helped and encouraged their revolt, "because" as a contemporary chronicler says, "they were resisting her son and bringing shame upon him." One should read the ecclesiastical writers to see to what a paroxysm of fury the religious party attained in their righteous wrath against the disobedient and shameless son, against the debauched and corrupt Prince. "Woe to thee", said Theodore of Studion, quoting the words of the Preacher, "woe to thee, O

I R E N E

land, when thy king is a child!" Constantine kept his head, and exerted himself by means of compromise to allay this terrific outburst. The principal centre of opposition being the monastery of Sakkudion in Bithynia, he went on pretext of a holiday to Prusa, the watering-place, and from there made all sorts of courteous overtures to the monks of the celebrated monastery. In the hope of placating them by such a mark of consideration he even paid them a visit. But nothing came of it. "If we have to shed our blood" said Theodore of Studion, "we will shed it gladly."

In the face of this intransigence the Emperor was so misguided as to lose patience, and he determined to employ force. Arrests were made; some of the religious were beaten with rods, imprisoned, or exiled; the remainder of the community was dispersed. But such rigorous punishments served only to complicate the situation. The monks everywhere fulminated against the tyrant, "the new Herod"; and in the very Palace the Abbot Plato came and insulted him to his face. Constantine had himself in hand. To the abbot's invectives he answered coldly: "I have no desire to make martyrs," and let him have his say. Unfortunately for him, he had already made too many. Public opinion was exasperated, and Irene knew how to profit by it.

During the court's sojourn in Prusa, the Empress-mother had played her cards very cleverly, and circumstances were as favourable as could be desired. Theodota, the young Basilissa, had had to return to the Sacred Palace for her accouchement, and Constantine, who was devoted to her, became restless

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

in her absence. Therefore when, in October, 796, he was told that she had borne him a son, he made haste to depart for Constantinople. He thus left the ground clear for Irene's intrigues. By gifts and promises and by her personal charm she quickly won over the principal officers of the guard to her side, and persuaded them to consent to a *coup d'état* making her sole Empress. The conspirators, acting as usual under Stauracius's orders, arranged to await a favourable moment. But there was still one reef upon which the whole scheme might suffer shipwreck. If Constantine were to achieve some brilliant military success it would probably serve to restore his tottering prestige; and, as a matter of fact, in March, 797, he had just begun the campaign against the Arabs. His mother's friends did not scruple to turn the expedition into failure by means of a lie very like treason, and the Emperor was obliged to return to Constantinople, having neither encountered the enemy nor accomplished anything.

The crisis was drawing near. On the 17th of July, 797, Constantine was returning from the Hippodrome to the Palace of St. Mamas. The traitors surrounding him thought their chance had come, and attempted to take him prisoner. He, however, succeeded in escaping, and jumping into a boat hurried across to the Asiatic shore, counting on the fidelity of the troops of the Anatolic Theme. Irene, who upon the news of the attempted arrest had immediately taken possession of the Great Palace, was terrified and lost her head; seeing her friends waver, and learning that the people were inclined to favour Constantine, she decided to humble herself and send

I R E N E

some bishops to him to intercede for her; when suddenly the passion for supreme power inspired her to play a last card. Many of the courtiers had compromised themselves very deeply with her in the plot; she threatened to denounce them to the Basileus and to turn over to him the incriminating documents. Terrified at this, and seeing no other means of averting certain destruction, the conspirators plucked up their courage and seized their unfortunate sovereign. He was brought back to Constantinople and shut up in the Sacred Palace; and there, in the Purple Pavilion where he had been born, the executioner came by his mother's orders and put out his eyes. However, he did not die. He was kept in seclusion in a splendid residence where later his wife Theodota, who had stood bravely by him during the crisis, was allowed to join him. She even bore him a second son; and thus he passed the remaining years of his life in quiet obscurity. But his days as Emperor were over.

Very few mourned the unfortunate Prince. The religious party in their narrow fanaticism looked upon his disgrace as the righteous, divinely-ordained punishment of his adulterous marriage, as the due reward of his stern treatment of the monks, as a memorable example whereby, says Theodore of Studion, "even Emperors will learn not to violate God's laws, nor to unchain impious persecutions." Pious souls once more acclaimed with gratitude and admiration the enfranchisement wrought by the Most Christian Empress Irene. The chronicler Theophanes, in spite of his devotion to the Basilissa, alone seems vaguely to have felt the horror of her crime. "For seventeen

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

days" says he, "the sun veiled himself and gave forth no light, so that vessels went astray upon the sea; and all men said that it was by reason of the Emperor's blinding that the sun forbore to shine; and thus ascended the throne Irene, mother to the Emperor."

V

Irene's dream was realised. From henceforth she seems to have been drunk with success and power. For she dared to do an unheard-of thing; a thing Byzantium had never seen before and was never to see again; she, a woman, assumed the title of Emperor. At the head of the Novels which she issued she styled herself proudly: "Irene, great Basileus and Autocrat of the Romans." Upon her coins and upon the ivory diptychs which have preserved her portrait¹ she appears in all the pomp and circumstance of sovereignty. Thus, and more splendidly still, she shewed herself to her people. On Easter-Monday of the year 799, she returned from the Church of the Holy Apostles to the Palace in solemn procession, in a golden chariot drawn by four white horses, each led by a high official. Wearing the splendid imperial robes that glittered with purple and gold, she, like the Consuls of Rome, threw money by the handful to the assembled multitude. It was her apotheosis, and the climax of her splendour.

At the same time, adroit as ever, she nursed her popularity and strengthened her power. Her brothers-in-law, the Caesars, whose ambition survived

¹ One is preserved in Vienna, the other in the Bargello at Florence. Cf. E. Molinier, *loc. cit.*, tome i, pp. 81-4.

I R E N E

their disgrace, intrigued against her once more. She put down their attempts cruelly and exiled them to distant Athens. To her friends the monks, on the other hand, she was attentive and beneficent, building them new monasteries and endowing restored ones lavishly. Owing to her favour, the great monastic establishments of Sakkudion in Bithynia and of the Studion in the capital attained to unprecedented prosperity. Finally, to conciliate the people, she undertook a whole series of liberal reforms — large remissions of taxation, reform of the financial administration, a lowering of customs duties both at frontiers and at ports, and of taxes upon food-stuffs and articles of manufacture; and she pleased the poor by her charitable foundations. Constantinople was enchanted, and hailed her as its benefactress.

Nevertheless, veiled intrigues were in progress at court around the aged sovereign; her favourites were wrangling over the succession. At her death the throne would be vacant, for only two daughters were born of Constantine VI's first marriage; as for the children of his second marriage, the elder son, Leo, had died a few months after birth, and the second, born after his father's downfall, was considered a bastard, the issue of an illegitimate connexion, and disqualified for the throne. The two eunuchs who governed the Empire, Stauracius and Aëtius, both hoped to obtain the power for their relatives, whom they helped to high positions. Irene's failing health, moreover, seemed to warrant the approaching fulfilment of their hopes. Jealous to the end, nevertheless, of her supreme power, and keenly suspicious of anyone who appeared to threaten her crown, the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

old Basilissa held tenaciously to the throne her crime had won.

For more than a year the Sacred Palace was the scene of continual denunciations and violent quarrels, of sudden downfalls and unexpected returns to favour. Aëtius inveighed against the plots and ambitions of Stauracius, and Stauracius stirred up revolts to ruin Aëtius, while between the two drifted Irene, disturbed and irritated, now punishing, now pardoning. There is something really tragic in this struggle between the old, worn-out Empress, clinging desperately to her throne, and the all-powerful minister, ill likewise and spitting blood, in the care of physicians and on the brink of death, but conspiring still, and hoping for the crown against all hope. He was the first to succumb, about the middle of the year 800. While the Byzantine court was wasting its time in such fruitless quarrels, at that very moment, in St. Peter's in Rome, Charlemagne was restoring the Empire of the West.

It is said that a grandiose idea was entertained by the Teutonic Cæsar and the aged sovereign of Byzantium — namely, a marriage which should unite their monarchies under their joint rule, and restore even more gloriously and more fully than in the time of Augustus, of Constantine, or of Justinian, the ancient unity of the *Orbis Romanus*. It does not seem probable; but, at all events, negotiations were set on foot to establish a *modus vivendi* between the two states. Frankish ambassadors were present in Constantinople when the final catastrophe occurred in which Irene was overthrown.

As the old Empress grew more feeble, the intrigues

I R E N E

became keener and bolder. Aëtius, all-powerful since the death of his rival, openly encouraged his brother and endeavoured to assure him the support of the army. Others of the great nobles were aroused against the favourite's haughtiness and insolent ambition; and one of the ministers, Nicephorus, the Grand Logothete, took advantage of the general unrest to conspire in his turn against the Basilissa. The Iconoclastic party silently prepared its revenge. On the 31st of October, 802, the revolution broke out. "God, in his wisdom that passeth understanding," says the pious Theophanes, "permitted it to happen, in order to punish the sins of mankind."

Irene was taking a holiday at her favourite residence, the Eleutherian Palace. The conspirators, among whom were former friends of Aëtius who had become discontented with the favourite, former intimates of Constantine VI, several Iconoclastic officers eager for revenge, high civil officials, courtiers, and even some relatives of the Empress, all of whom she had loaded with gifts, took advantage of her absence. At ten o'clock in the evening they appeared at the gates of the Sacred Palace and shewed the guards of the Chalce forged orders, purporting to come from the Basilissa, in which she commanded Nicephorus to be proclaimed Emperor without delay, in order that he might help her to withstand the intrigues of Aëtius. The soldiers allowed themselves to be persuaded, and surrendered the Palace.

In every Byzantine revolution the Palace was the essential point which had to be gained at the outset, as the token and symbol of victory. And, as a matter of fact, the night had not passed before messengers

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

had announced to the whole city Nicephorus's achievement and the success of the *coup d'état*. No resistance was offered. At the same time, Irene was taken by surprise and arrested at Eleutherion, sent heavily guarded to Constantinople, and shut up in the Sacred Palace; while on the following morning in St. Sophia the new Basileus caused himself to be crowned in haste by the Patriarch Tarasius, who seems to have forgotten his benefactress. Nevertheless, nothing was settled. Irene was popular; and the mob, recovering from their first surprise, were openly hostile to the conspirators. They insulted the new master and cursed the Patriarch; and many people, remembering the protestations of loyalty with which the plotters had tricked the Empress, taxed them vigorously with their ingratitude. They sighed for the old order that had been overthrown and for the prosperity it had brought, and dreaded what the future might have in store; the multitude, unable to believe what had happened, wondered if they were not the victims of a nightmare. Consternation and grief were universal, and the cold, foggy autumn morning made the dawn of the new reign even more desolate.

A woman of real energy might perhaps have profited by this situation; Irene did not. Between ambition and piety, the two sentiments that divided her soul and had governed her life, piety this time proved the stronger. Not that her downfall in any way weakened her courage, for she shewed no weakness; but in the face of an accomplished fact, "as a wise and God-fearing woman", to quote a contemporary, she yielded without a murmur. Nicephorus,

I R E N E

on the day after his coronation, went to visit her, his eyes filled with hypocritical tears, and, shewing her, with his customary feigned good nature, the black shoes he wore instead of the imperial red buskins, assured her that his hands had been forced, and almost apologised for being Emperor. But Irene, with Christian resignation, humbled herself before the new Basileus as before God's Anointed, blessing the mysterious decrees of Providence, and acknowledging her sins as the cause of her downfall. She made no reproach and uttered no complaint; upon Nicephorus's request she even surrendered him her wealth, asking only that she should be allowed free use of the Eleutherian Palace.

The usurper promised all that she asked, and assured her that during her life she should be treated "as becomes a Basilissa." But he lost no time in forgetting his promises. The aged sovereign was removed from Constantinople and exiled at first to the monastery she had founded on the island of Prinkipo. But even there she seemed too near. In November, 802, despite the unusual severity of the winter, she was sent to Lesbos. There she was kept closely guarded, and no one was allowed to approach her — to such an extent were her intrigues and the tenacity of her ambition still feared. In this captivity she died miserably, in the month of August, 803, deserted by all. Her body was brought back to the monastery on Prinkipo, and later to Constantinople, where she was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles, in the mortuary chapel where so many Emperors slept.

Irene was so pious and orthodox a sovereign that the Church has forgiven her everything, even her

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

crimes.¹ The Byzantine chroniclers of her time call her the Blessed Irene, the New Helena, "she who fought for the true faith like a martyr." Theophanes mourns her loss as a catastrophe, and looks back upon the years of her reign as upon an era of unusual prosperity. Theodore of Studion, a saint, addressed the basest flatteries to her, not finding words rapturous enough to describe "the wholly good sovereign", "so pure a spirit, so holy a soul", who by her piety and her desire to please God had delivered her people from slavery, and whose deeds "shine like stars." Irene deserves of history less indulgence and more justice. One can understand, and, if one wishes, forgive, the error of sincere folk whom party spirit has blinded in regard to her; but one must beware of sharing their error. Rightly regarded, this famous sovereign was a politician, ambitious and devout, whom the passion for power drove to crime, and whose achievements were totally insufficient to compensate for the horror of her deed. For by her intrigues she reopened in Byzantium for a period of eighty years, to the great detriment of the monarchy, the era of palace revolutions to which for nearly a century her glorious predecessors the Iconoclastic Emperors had put an end.

¹ It must, however, be noted that some Byzantines felt the horror of Irene's crime keenly enough, and tried to relieve her of the responsibility of it. The chronicler George the Monk, writing in the ninth century, declares that Constantine was blinded "without her being present, or even being privy to her ministers' plans."

V

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN OF
THE EIGHTH CENTURY

THE object of what is perhaps our liveliest interest in any vanished society — namely, the middle classes, their sentiments, their ways of life and thought, their condition, and their private life —, is that on which we have least information, and into which the documentary evidence affords us fewest glimpses. Concerning the great personages, emperors and empresses, popes and patriarchs, ministers and generals, all who have stood in the foreground and filled the stage of history, we have complete and sufficiently accurate accounts; we know their deeds, we are able to unravel their motives, and we may flatter ourselves that we have penetrated to their very souls. But this is no longer the case when we descend a few rungs of the social ladder; here with but rare exceptions all is darkness. And yet these folk who never emerged into the full blaze of history are sometimes more instructive to the historian than persons of greater celebrity. A great man, from the very fact of his greatness, is always to some extent exceptional and abnormal; whereas the common man is usually but a specimen of an oft-repeated type, and has thus a certain representative value. If we know one, we can imagine a

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

thousand others; and, since these same obscure thousands are the raw material of history, it is obvious what a light such a study, whenever it is possible, will shed upon the character and opinions of an epoch.

There may, then, be some interest in attempting to portray, as a pendant to the Most Pious Empress Irene, a woman of the middle classes who was her contemporary. Theoctista was her name, and she was the mother of that fiery monk and ardent controversialist, that brave, impassioned fighter, Theodore of Studion. Owing to the curious funeral oration that her son delivered in her honour, and to other documents besides, we know her fairly well. With her as guide, therefore, we are able to penetrate a little way into the family life and ideals of those almost unknown Byzantine middle classes, whose strong, sterling qualities were of such importance for the prosperity of the monarchy. This is her first contribution to our better understanding of that society. But we shall be still further indebted to her. By shewing us the character and prejudices of a typical middle-class woman of her time, she will help us to a glimpse of the character and prejudices of the troubled century she lived in. She will help us, more especially, to a clearer comprehension and to a less exaggerated judgement of that Empress Irene, whom at first sight we find so offensive and so utterly disconcerting; and, finally, she will help us to a better understanding of the events of the picturesque, stormy period in which, whether directly or through her son, she was more than once implicated.

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

I

Theoctista was born in Constantinople in the eighth century, probably about the year 740, of a middle-class family in easy, almost rich, circumstances. She was the third child. Of her sister little is known except that she lived in the world; but her brother, who bore the ancient name of Plato, later became famous, and exercised a great influence upon her. While still a child, Theoctista was left an orphan. The great plague of 747, which wrought such havoc in the capital, carried off her parents and most of her near relatives. An uncle who had a position in the Imperial Ministry of Finance took charge of the unfortunate children. He educated the boy very carefully, so as to fit him for public office. His education was a complete success. Plato was a wise, sensible young man, who carefully avoided bad companions, spending neither his time in pleasure-seeking nor his money in gambling—a prudent young fellow, who soon learned how to take care of his fortune and increase it, one who was regarded by Byzantine mothers as an excellent match for their daughters. But this object of maternal speculations hated the world; he was very pious, and went more often to church than to the theatre; he preferred reading to amusements, and his precocious perfection was the admiration of his confessor. In the brother the sister is already foreshadowed.

As was customary among Byzantine families, the uncle took much less pains with the girls' education than with the boy's. In this, in many respects, so oriental a society, daughters were always brought

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

up at home; and, therefore, when relatives were deficient in their duty, girls received little education. Thus it was with Theoctista. She was very ignorant, and had later to work hard to fill in the gaps in her early training. Her guardian troubled himself only to see her suitably married. In those days, a sensible man, capable of making the best of his life, was the ideal husband in the eyes of Byzantine parents. Theoctista's uncle found his paragon in the ministry in which he himself was employed. His name was Photinus, and he was a high official in the Treasury, well considered at court, and on the road to higher honours. Since the girl was rich — her personal estate had just been increased by part of that of her brother, who had recently entered a monastery —, matters were easily arranged, and the proposed marriage took place.

Theoctista was a woman after many a husband's heart. She cared neither for dress nor for society. She avoided vain ornaments and always wore dark colours. When obliged to go out, as for example to a marriage-feast, she was reserved and modest in her demeanour, chastely lowering her eyes when the comic interludes began at dessert-time, and hardly venturing to taste of the dishes set before her. Not that she was timid or awkward; but she was essentially a virtuous woman, whose duties were her chief concern, and whose horizon was bounded by her husband's wishes, the good management of her household, and the proper education of her children.

It is hardly necessary to add that she was devout. "To worship God and love Him alone" was for her the essential virtue. Her piety was, nevertheless,

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

entirely devoid of superstition; and this fact does honour to her sound common sense and her strength of mind. In the eighth century, indeed, Christianity still contained a large admixture of paganism; belief in sorcery, incantations, and charms, was very widespread. For example, to protect new-born children from harm it was the general custom to hang amulets in their rooms and on their cradles, to repeat magical formulas over them, and to put strings of beads and talismans around their necks; since it was a matter of common knowledge that their frail lives were threatened by innumerable dangers, and that hosts of unseen sorceresses, with the power of passing through the most securely-closed doors, lay in wait to destroy them. Careful mothers, therefore, had recourse to astrologers, who, by casting the child's horoscope, could dispel the danger. But Theoctista, although severely censured by her household, took no stock in such practices, believing that the sign of the cross made over the child was ample protection. She was constantly in the habit of praying, repeating psalms, and reading religious books, even far into the night; she fasted frequently, and never swore nor told lies. She applied herself also to good works in order to merit eternal life. Although not very rich, her charity was unbounded. Widows and orphans, the aged and the sick — even those suffering from the most revolting diseases, such as epileptics and lepers —, found in her a help and a support; and no feast-day passed that she did not feed "some one of Christ's poor", as she called them, at her own table. Such being her character, it was natural that she should feel a great detachment from mun-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

dane interests; and it was natural likewise that she should be devoted to the images, and most respectful to the monks, their defenders.

Nevertheless, she was an energetic, strong-minded woman, who liked authority, and who ruled her household with a rod of iron. As in many Byzantine families, she seems to have been far more important in the home than her husband. She was an admirable housekeeper, and her piety interfered in no way with her duties; she thought of everything, oversaw everything, often helping with her own hands, and spared no pains to have the household well managed and prosperous. She was always alert, and never abandoned her responsibilities to the servants. To them she was kind and considerate; on feast-days she added some sweets, fresh meat, fish, fowl, and wine of better quality to their usual diet of bread, wine, and lard, saying that it would not be just for her alone to enjoy these dainties. But when it came to questions of morals or misconduct, or any one of the thousand ways of "beating the devil around the bush", she was inflexible; and, as this dictatorial woman was of an irritable disposition, she not infrequently suited the action to the word. She was quick to strike, and when angry gave buffets thick and fast. Her servants, however, were devoted to her, for they knew that she meant everything for the best, and that when her anger was past she would earnestly ask their pardon. After striking one of her women she was always a prey to deep remorse; on such occasions she would retire to her bedroom to beat her face and do penance, and then, calling the servant she had struck, would go down on her knees before her and humbly beg forgiveness.

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

She ruled her family in the same firm, harsh way. She loved her husband, and took great care never to worry him; but nevertheless she persuaded him to live with her like a brother, pointing out that life is after all but a preparation for death, and that, in order to be the readier for the great separation, it is best to begin in this world the suppression of the more intimate contacts. No less carefully did she keep watch over the education and moral training of her children. She had three sons and a daughter. Although, as we have seen, fairly ignorant, she educated herself so as to bring them up well; but, being conscientious, she studied by candlelight, sitting up very late, so as not to neglect the duties she owed in the day-time to her husband and her household. In the formation of her children's character she was careful above all to set them good examples; thus it was that she associated her daughter with her from childhood in works of charity, teaching her to succour the poor and making her take care of lepers. At the same time she set her to reading holy books, thus arousing her piety and turning her away from the world, and shewed her neither jewels nor purple clothing, for already she intended her for the service of God.

But her son Theodore was her favourite. He was a quiet child, older than his years; he cared little for games or for comrades, but preferred reading, chiefly religious books, a practice in which his mother naturally encouraged him. Until he was seven she kept him constantly with her and guarded him tenderly; later, when he had tutors, and when, after the elementary lessons were over, he studied grammar,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

dialectic, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology, she still watched over him with care. In this, as in everything else, she employed that combination of tenderness and sternness which was at the bottom of her system of education and government — good advice and maternal exhortations, often backed up with the rod. Nevertheless, there was a charming simplicity, piety, and deep, solid affection between the mother and her children. Every night after they had gone to bed, Theoctista came and made the sign of the cross over them as they lay asleep; in the morning, her first thought was to have them say their prayers. Many years later, in writing to his dying mother, Theodore of Studion gratefully recalls the constant, tender care with which she prayed day and night for the happiness and safety of her dear ones.

II

Such was Theoctista. But during the evil days that befell the Church under Constantine V and his son, it would have been imprudent to disclose one's true feelings too openly, especially when one was the wife of an official. It is probable, then, that like the Empress Irene, she concealed her opinions to some extent. But when, after the death of Leo IV, Irene's regency brought better days to the forbidden images and to the persecuted monks, her long-pent-up piety burst forth in a torrent.

With the new order of things Plato, Theoctista's brother, returned to Constantinople; the first act of this austere monk was to preach a kind of mission on morals. In his discourses he advocated chiefly

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

contempt of the world, love for the poor, and the cultivation of good habits; and as he was eloquent and of a very ascetic appearance, he soon made a great success. Naturally, he was not slow in exercising a deep influence upon his devout sister and her household, and in particular upon his young nephew, Theodore. In Theoctista's house monks became constant and welcome guests, and, from contact with them, the pious woman soon became convinced that her best course was to devote herself to the Lord, together with all her family. Her eldest son had long been ready. Between them they won over the father; and afterwards the other children. Finally Theoctista prevailed upon three of her husband's brothers to embrace the religious life; and they all resolved to retire from the world, with its temptations and vanities.

When their decision became known, it made a great sensation in the capital, and all the friends and acquaintances of Theoctista's family were profoundly moved at the sight of these rich, well-considered, happy people thus renouncing all the pleasures of worldly life and all hopes of political advancement, breaking the tender bonds of human affections, and voluntarily abandoning all desire of perpetuating an illustrious line. The Empress Irene herself is said to have been deeply touched. But Theoctista was not to be dissuaded by any argument. "On the day she had fixed for leaving her home" writes her son, "she assembled the entire household as if to a feast. The men were downcast and the women in tears at this strange phenomenon of a willing departure; but all, feeling the greatness of the mystery, joined piously in

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

celebrating the event." On this occasion Theoctista attended to everything with her accustomed orderliness and care for details. She began by sending away her husband, who was more moved than he perhaps should have been at leaving what had been his life. Then she saw to the sale of the house and the distribution of all the available money among the poor. She discharged the servants, and gave them each a small gift in memory of their former masters. After which, having performed all her worldly duties, Theoctista gave herself wholly to God. Her taking of the veil was a solemn and moving ceremony.

The general curiosity, greatly excited by all that had taken place, drew an enormous crowd to the church. "We too were there with our father," says Theodore of Studion, "not knowing whether to be happy or to weep. We were losing our mother; already we could no longer approach her or speak to her with our former freedom; and, knowing that we were to be separated from her, our hearts were oppressed with grief. We ourselves, and our father, were to receive the tonsure as soon as the ceremony was over; and I, who was quite a big boy, found that my grief and tears were mixed with gladness; but my youngest brother, who was still a child, when the hour of separation came and the time for the last farewell and the final kisses, ran to my mother, pressing himself to her breast, and, clinging desperately to her, begged her to keep him with her a little while longer, promising that he would obey her in everything. Do you imagine that her diamond heart wavered or broke at the child's pleadings? Not for a moment.

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

What did the holy woman answer? Triumphant over her maternal affection, she looked sternly at her son, and said: 'If you do not go immediately, my child, of your own will, I myself will put you on board the vessel that is to take you away.'" Theodore greatly admires such stoic austerity of soul that sacrifices everything to religion, even the most natural and lawful affections of the human heart. We find it more difficult, I admit, to share his admiration; and even the pious commentators of Theodore's writings consider it somewhat excessive. But it is none the less interesting to find both mother and son sharing thoughts and feelings that surprise and shock us. By reading of such states of mind as these we are the better able to understand Irene's evil deed, and how it was that Theodore of Studion found no word of censure for such a crime committed by a mother against her son.

After Theoctista had taken the veil, the whole family retired to one of its estates in Bithynia, called Sakkudion. It was a hill planted with trees, at the top of which was a little plain; it was watered by a small brook, and there was a noble view, shewing wide stretches of sky, and in the distance the silver line of the sea. It would have been impossible to find a quieter retreat, or one more suitable for a religious house. But the monastery of Sakkudion was not a worldly establishment, such as rich people of that time often founded in a spirit rather of ostentation than of piety. Such folk, on taking the vows, kept their fortunes and their slaves, and led their usual life, and, without any real vocation or previous experience, set themselves to govern a religious com-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

munity, "novices yesterday, abbots today." At Theoctista's request the austere Plato had accepted the task of organising and directing the monastery in which his relatives were to live, and he acquitted himself conscientiously of his task. He firmly excluded slaves and women from the monastery, and following the usual custom of Byzantine monks, forbade female animals of all kinds to enter it. Theoctista herself had to obey the general rule and live apart from the others; and, since there had not been time to build a house for the women, she dwelt at first as a recluse in an isolated cell with her daughter and one of her relatives. Later she entered a convent; but, in spite of her humility and her desire to obey, it does not seem as if this masterful woman made a very accommodating nun. Her son Theodore speaks with some embarrassment of the difficulties she had with the other sisters, and of the vexations she underwent; she was obliged at last to quit the convent and find another retreat. Happily for her, circumstances were to give her piety an opportunity to manifest itself on a higher plane, and in a manner worthier of herself.

III

We have related the story of the Emperor Constantine VI's first marriage, and his great desire, about the year 795, to be rid of his wife. In order to repudiate Mary of Amnia and marry Theodota he devised a curious scheme. In the characteristically ingenuous conviction that everyone would believe him "since" in his own words, "he was the Basileus addressing his subjects", he declared that his wife

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

had attempted to poison him. Thereupon he sent one of his chamberlains to notify the Patriarch, and asked that the Church should annul his marriage without delay. But Tarasius was very sceptical regarding the alleged crime, and answered that the law recognised only one ground for divorce, to wit, duly attested adultery; and he refused to fall in with the sovereign's wishes. In vain Constantine summoned him to the Palace, explaining that the crime was clear and undeniable, and that by death alone, or at least by seclusion in a monastery, could such attempted treason be adequately punished. In vain it was that in support of his accusations he produced vessels full of a muddy liquid, which he stated to be the very poison that the Empress had tried to administer to him. Tarasius persisted in his refusal, threatening the Emperor with excommunication if he did not renounce the project; and John the Syncellus backed him up. Thereupon, in the Emperor's presence, courtiers, patricians, and generals, began to insult the two prelates, and, sword in hand, threatened them with death if they did not yield. It was all to no purpose. In the end, as we know, Constantine did persist in his design; he thrust his wife by force into a convent, and, amid splendid festivities lasting no less than forty days, married Theodota. Tarasius indignantly refused to bless this adulterous union; but he was a politician, and took care not to go to extremes. Without protesting, he allowed another priest to solemnize the imperial marriage, and, fearing to drive the Basileus to the wall and turn him against the Church, forebore to launch the threatened excommunication;

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

he did not even punish the cleric who had performed the ceremony.

We have seen the universal scandal that the Emperor's conduct caused among the religious party. It was peculiarly abhorrent to the monks of Sakkudion, not only because it violated their principles, but even more because Theodota, the heroine of the romance, was a near relative of the Abbot Plato, of Theoctista, and of Theodore. Moreover, while courtiers and politicians acquiesced servilely in their sovereign's act, pious folk, excited and sustained by the Sakkudion monks, thundered against the "new Herod", the disobedient son who, said they — and the reproach has piquancy when we remember Irene's conduct in the matter —, had disrespectfully ignored his mother's good advice. And Plato and his monks definitely refused to remain in communion with the adulterous Prince, or even with the prelates who upheld or tolerated his misconduct.

Constantine VI was exceedingly indignant at all this uproar, and did his best to overcome the monks' stubborn and embarrassing opposition. He tried in vain by presents and fair words to cause them to relent; but to no effect. Theodota made an attempt on her own part to appease her relatives, and paid a visit to the monastery; but she was indignantly repulsed. Constantine then moved to Prusa, and went to Sakkudion in person, in the hope of persuading Plato and Theodore. All these negotiations merely demonstrated to the religious party their own power and served but to increase their obstinacy. At last the Emperor lost his temper. The Domestic of the Scholae and the Count of the Opsikian Theme

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

were dispatched with soldiers to the Sakkudion. The Abbot Plato was arrested and sent strongly guarded to Constantinople; and Theodore and three other monks were cruelly beaten with rods. Then the ten principal ringleaders, among whom, besides Theodore, were his father and his brother Joseph, were exiled to Thessalonica; the rest of the community were dispersed, and people were forbidden to harbour them. "Christ was asleep", says Theodore of Studion, bitterly, in the interesting account he has left of this persecution.

In her family's trouble Theoctista shewed a singular strength of soul. Despite her sorrow she encouraged, upheld, consoled, and fortified the victims: "Go, my sons", said she to the expelled monks, "and may God protect you whithersoever you go, since it is in obedience to His law that you have ordered your conduct." She was always vigorous and full of joy, visiting them in prison, dressing their wounds, and cheering those who were frightened and distressed. When the monks were obliged to leave their monastery, she went with them, caring nothing for the insults with which the crowd assailed them. When the soldiers separated her brutally from her beloved ones, she found means to rejoin them on their road to exile, and there at night, in a miserable hut, she saw them for the last time. When morning came she bade them farewell. "My sons," said she, "I feel that I am taking leave of men who are going to their death"; and pathetically, amid sighs and tears, she covered with kisses every part of those dear bodies that she never thought to see again.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Then she returned to Constantinople, as energetic and brave as ever. Plato, who had dared reprimand the Emperor to his very face, had just been sent to prison; and Euthymius, Theoctista's youngest son, had been cruelly flogged. Here again the pious woman spared neither efforts nor trouble. In spite of the imperial prohibition, she gathered together the scattered and proscribed monks, and sustained her brother's courage in the prison where he was confined. She did so much that she herself was finally arrested and sent for a whole month to gaol, where she was badly treated by her warders, ill fed, and loaded with insults. But among pious folk she was accorded a martyr's crown, and was held to be a Mother of the Church, for being thus persecuted in the good cause; and her glory was great for having, as an eighth-century writer puts it, in a phrase which became famous, "suffered for the sake of justice and truth" (ἔνεκεν δικαιοσύνης καὶ ἀληθείας).

IV

When, in 797, Irene's *coup d'état* brought the crisis to an end and stopped the persecution, Theoctista, no longer worried about the fate of her family, went back to her Bithynian convent. And until her last hour she lived as she had always lived.

Her piety, which had at first been aroused by suffering, and afterwards made jubilant by the joy of victory, had become greater than ever. The good woman's chief concern and true happiness was to meditate ceaselessly upon God's Word, to pray day and night for the Church, for her family, and for

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

salvation of her soul, and to assist devoutly at interminable offices. She became more ascetic than ever. In order to mortify the flesh, she had accustomed herself to sleep upon a short narrow bed, to dress herself in miserable clothes, and to take wholly insufficient nourishment. She would have been ashamed to eat her fill, and all that she allowed herself was once a day to taste a few vegetables cooked in water without any oil; and she never drank wine with her frugal meals. She had also imposed absolute poverty upon herself; she had no servant, no money of her own, no change of clothes. At her death her wardrobe, or rather her entire fortune, consisted of a horsehair shirt and two poor cloaks.

Nevertheless, Theoctista did not become a mystic. In her "solitude with God", to use her son's beautiful phrase, as in her life in the world, she had always to be doing something. She never became absorbed in useless dreams, but worked with her hands, and took upon herself the task of weaving the material from which to make the clothes for the whole community. She increased in good works, bringing poor women to the convent, taking care of them, and doing her utmost to collect money for them. And as formerly at home, so also now, she watched affectionately over the members of her family, their moral progress, and their eternal salvation. She worried about her husband, who at times was very lukewarm, and about her son, Euthymius, whose vocation for the monastic life did not seem to her very strong. And, watching over them from a distance, she noted their conduct closely and guided their souls.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

More than ever she strove for Christian humility. Since Plato, her brother, was still in prison, she made her son Theodore her confessor and spiritual director; she got down on her knees to him, saying that she was his servant, and did her best to obey him in everything, regarding him simply as the revered head of the community. And despite the views he professed upon the surpassing merit of devotion, Theodore was sometimes embarrassed by her excessive reverence. However, the old quarrelsome, domineering temper sometimes reawoke in her, notwithstanding her humility. In the convent, as in the world, Theoctista was still imperious and quicktempered. When the other sisters seemed to be lacking in earnest attention at the offices, or wanting in diligence at their work or in the chants, she reprimanded them and scolded them harshly; she was as quick as ever to strike, and reinforced her loving admonition with good sound blows. But the sisters forgave her her outbursts, for they knew that she had a kind heart; and in the convent, as in her former home, all were devoted to her.

Thus she lived, "having forsaken all to give all to God; she walked in the straight and narrow path of the Lord." She was universally respected; the whole community looked upon her as a true Mother of Souls, and the religious party, as a true Mother of the Church. To enhance the glory of her sanctity it was said that she had the gift of prophecy, and that she was vouchsafed dreams in which she learnt her own and her family's destiny, and that of the Church.

Nevertheless, she was slowly dying. She was over

A MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

sixty, her life had been a difficult one, and her last years had been saddened by a succession of sorrows. One after the other she had lost her husband, her daughter, and her son Euthymius; and the two sons who remained were as good as dead, so far as she was concerned. For her favourite, Theodore, lived in Constantinople, where he ruled over the monastery of the Studion, and she no longer saw him except on very rare occasions. Her other son, Joseph, was also separated from her; all her former friends were dead or scattered. In her solitude she sometimes felt sad unto death; but she never gave in for long to this too-human weakness; and turning her thoughts to God took courage once more. Thus she died, far from her family, without even Theodore, who was detained by the affairs of his monastery, at her death-bed to close her eyes. Nevertheless, she departed "joyfully, as one who returns to her native land", praying for her son, and blessing those who were with her. This was just before the year 802.

The news of this good woman's death made a great sensation in the Church. At the monastery of the Studion, of which her son was abbot, they had followed all the phases of her illness with passionate attention, praying solemnly for her soul; and they held a splendid service in her memory. Theodore himself delivered the funeral oration, and it is to its fortunate preservation that we owe our knowledge of Theoctista's curious personality.

In this woman's soul, commonplace in many respects, there are some characteristics which to us are strange and surprising indeed. Both mother

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and son have a native harshness that we find astonishing and repellent. Theoctista loved her children; but she sacrificed them unflinchingly on the altar of her religion. Theodore loved his mother; but in his curious letter to her during her last illness, though mourning her approaching end, he calmly hopes for her death as the glorious reward of her life. We find some difficulty in understanding a religious emotion that expresses itself so strangely; and even pious souls have found it excessive. But whatever judgement we may pass upon these people of the eighth century, we must admit that they are a powerful help in understanding the history of their times. By studying these devotees, in whom religion has destroyed all else, we can better understand the character of the Empress Irene, and are the less astonished at her success, and at the almost universal applause that her actions elicited. For it must be kept in mind that the case of Theoctista is by no means unique in the psychological history of her century. Many other women of this period, such, for example, as the mother of Tarasius and the mother of Nicephorus, the mother of Theophanes and the pious women of the family of St. Philaret, all seem very like her in the writings of the hagiographers. To be sure, the women I have mentioned are saints, like our Theoctista; and I do not mean that all their contemporaries were cast in the same mould. There were women of the world as well, like Theoctista's sister, and women of loose morals, like her relative, Theodota. But their importance to the historian lies in the fact that for several years it was the saints who ruled the world.

VI

THE BLESSED THEODORA

I

IN the year 829, Michael II the Amorion, Emperor of Byzantium, died, leaving the throne to his son, Theophilus. The new sovereign was unmarried; and at first, therefore, the Empress-dowager Euphrosyne took the place in the court ceremonies reserved by etiquette for the Augusta. But Euphrosyne detested the world. Daughter by his first wife, Mary, of the unfortunate Constantine VI, so cruelly blinded by order of his mother, Irene, she had retired, after the downfall of her family, to one of the convents of Prinkipo. There she had lived in quiet seclusion until, not without some scandal, the Basileus Michael had taken the beautiful nun, whom he loved passionately, out of her convent and set her upon the throne of the Caesars. But as soon as her husband was dead, Euphrosyne's one wish was to return immediately to some holy retreat; she therefore bent all her endeavours to finding a wife for the young Emperor, her step-son, without delay.

In accordance with the traditional custom of the Byzantine court, messengers scoured the provinces to find the most beautiful girls in the Empire and bring them to Constantinople; and they were gathered together in the great Pavilion of the Pearl

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

so that from among them Theophilus might choose the tuture Empress. He first selected the six most attractive; but, finding himself unable to decide, postponed his definite choice until the morrow. On the following day he appeared among the girls holding, like Paris among the three goddesses, a golden apple, to be given to her whom he should choose, and thus equipped he began his inspection. He stopped at first in front of a very lovely, high-born maiden, named Kasia, and being rather embarrassed, perhaps, and not quite knowing how to start conversation, began sententiously with the following dubious compliment:

“A woman was the fount and source
Of all man’s tribulation.”

Kasia was witty, and retorted undismayed:

“And from a woman sprang the course
Of man’s regeneration.¹”

This answer ruined her chances. Theophilus was terrified by her quick repartee and her emancipated point of view, and turning his back upon her gave the apple and the Empire to an equally beautiful candidate, Theodora.

Kasia consoled herself for the loss of the throne in characteristic Byzantine fashion by founding a convent to which she retired; and, being a clever woman, passed her time composing religious poems and secular epigrams that have come down to us and

¹ This metrical translation is taken from J. B. Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire from the Fall of Irene to the Accession of Basil I (A.D. 802-867)*, 1912, p. 82 and note (2). [Translator’s Note].

THE BLESSED THEODORA

that are not without interest. Meanwhile her successful rival had been crowned with great ceremony in St. Stephen's Church in the Palace of Daphne, and, as usual, all her family shared her good fortune. Her mother, Theoctista, received the much-coveted dignity of Patrician of the Girdle, her three sisters were married to high dignitaries, and her brothers, Petronas and Bardas, moved rapidly from one honour to another. They were destined to shew but little gratitude to her whose unforeseen elevation and sisterly affection had brought them to the very steps of the throne.

The new Empress was an Asiatic, born in Paphlagonia of a family of officials. Her relatives were pious folk, much attached to the worship of the images, against which the successors of the most pious Irene had resumed the struggle; it seems that her family had given proof of considerable zeal for their faith. Having been brought up in such an environment, Theodora was naturally devout and entertained great respect for the holy icons; wherefore at first she was not a little disconcerted by the court life into which her marriage had suddenly translated her.

The Iconoclastic controversy had been reopened about twenty years before, and was perhaps even bitterer than in the eighth century, since to the religious question a political motive had been added, the State advancing the right of interference in matters ecclesiastical, and the Church defending its liberties. Michael II had persecuted his opponents openly and unscrupulously; and Theophilus, an intelligent, masterful, energetic Prince, followed his father's

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

example and continued his policy. Theodora tried in vain to use her influence in her friends' favour, and temper by her entreaties the rigour of the persecution. Theophilus was not a very good-natured monarch; when he frowned and raised his voice his wife became terrified and dared not press the point, and she herself was obliged carefully to dissimulate her sentiments and her private sympathies. She had to conceal under her clothes the holy images that she insisted upon wearing, she had to take innumerable precautions in hiding away the forbidden icons in chests in her own room, and she sometimes ran considerable risk in performing her secret devotions.

One day the Emperor's jester, a dwarf who used to amuse the whole Palace by his malicious witticisms, surprised the Empress at her prayers. Being of an inquisitive turn of mind, he asked to see the objects that so absorbed her attention. "These are my dolls," said Theodora; "they are pretty, and I love them dearly." The dwarf ran as fast as he could and told the Emperor about the beautiful dollies that the Basilissa kept under her pillow. Theophilus instantly understood what was going on, and, furious at finding his orders flouted in his own Palace, hurried off to the Gynaecium and began to make a violent scene. But Theodora was a woman, and knew how to get herself out of the difficulty. "It is not what you suspect at all," she said to her husband; "I was simply looking at myself in the mirror with my attendants, and your dwarf thought that the faces he saw reflected were religious images, and stupidly went off and told you so." Theophilus quieted down, or pretended to be convinced; but

THE BLESSED THEODORA

Theodora lay in wait for the taleteller. A few days later she had the dwarf soundly whipped for some peccadillo, and then warned him never again to talk about dolls in the Gynaecium. And when, after drinking, the Emperor would occasionally revert to the subject and question the dwarf, the latter used to make a significant gesture, putting one hand on his mouth and the other upon that part of his person which had been flogged, and say hurriedly: "No, no, Sir, let's not talk about dolls."

In the high society of the capital there was a general conspiracy in favour of the icons. The old Empress Euphrosyne, in the convent where she was spending the last years of her life, shared Theodora's sentiments, and whenever the small daughters of the Basileus came to pay her a visit, talked constantly to them about the holy images. Theophilus, who suspected as much, always questioned the children on their return, without, however, obtaining any definite information. But one day the youngest of the imperial princesses gave it away, for, after telling her father about the lovely presents they had received at the convent, and the wonderful fruits they had eaten, she went on to explain that her grandmother had also a chest all full of beautiful dolls, and that she often touched them to the children's foreheads, and made them kiss them devoutly. Theophilus once more became angry and forbade his little daughters to visit the old Basilissa any more. But even among the courtiers many, including statesmen, held the same beliefs as the two Empresses; ministers and privy counsellors were quietly but deeply devoted to image-worship, and matters had reached such a pass

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

that even the astrologers whom the Emperor was in the habit of consulting prophesied openly to him the approaching overthrow of his work. He himself felt it so strongly that on his death-bed he made his wife and his Prime Minister, the Logothete Theoctistus, swear a solemn oath not to alter his policy, nor to interfere with his friend the Patriarch John, who had been its chief instigator. Final precautions have rarely been so useless.

II

The successor of Theophilus, his son Michael III, was a child; in 842, at the time of his father's death, he was not more than three or four years old; so, like Irene, Theodora assumed the regency during the minority of the young sovereign. She retained the principal ministers of the late reign, the Logothete Theoctistus, who had great influence with her, and the Magister Manuel. Both were devout men, secretly attached, like the Basilissa herself, to image-worship; and being, moreover, men of sense, who were rightly worried at the long continuance of a useless and dangerous conflict, they naturally entertained the idea of restoring Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, in spite of their suggestions, the Empress seems at first to have hesitated. Theodora had loved her husband very much; she was devotedly attached to his memory, and dreaded, furthermore, the difficulties of the undertaking. But all the courtiers did their best to convince her; her mother and brothers were constantly giving her advice. In vain the Basilissa objected, saying: "My husband, the late Emperor, was a wise man; he knew what was

THE BLESSED THEODORA

expedient; we really cannot ignore his wishes." The danger of the situation was pointed out to her, the unpopularity she would incur if she were to persist in carrying out Theophilus's policy; she was worried by suggestions of a revolution in which her son might lose his throne. Her piety, moreover, prompted her to heed the advice that was given her so freely; and she yielded.

A synod was assembled at Constantinople. But in order that it should accomplish its task satisfactorily the Patriarch had first to be removed. John, whom Theophilus had made Patriarch in 834, had been the Emperor's tutor. He was an intelligent, active, energetic man, and had lent his powerful aid to the sovereign's purposes; wherefore the opponents of the Iconoclastic party detested him. They represented him as a magician, nicknaming him Lecanomantis, or the Sorcerer, the new Apollonius, the new Balaam; they circulated the most horrid stories about him: how he had been able to destroy the Emperor's enemies by magic; how he had come by night, muttering mysterious charms, and cut off the head of the bronze serpent in the Hippodrome; and how, in his suburban house, he had fashioned a subterranean and diabolical cave, where, in the company of fallen women, generally of wonderful beauty, several of whom, by a refinement of scandal, were said to be nuns consecrated to God, he conjured up demons by impure sacrifices, and questioned the dead to learn the secrets of the future. But, whether or not this gossip was well founded, John was a man of high intelligence and strong will, and therefore very embarrassing. To get rid of him, he was ordered

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

either to consent to the re-establishment of Orthodoxy or to resign; and it seems that the soldiers sent to convey this ultimatum did it rather roughly. At all events, the Patriarch was deposed and shut up in a monastery; and when, in fury at his overthrow, he ventured to display his temper by mutilating the images in the monastery, the Regent ordered him to be severely flogged.

One of the victims of the former administration, Methodius, was put in his place, and a general reaction began at once. The bishops undertook the restoration of image-worship; those who had been exiled and proscribed were called home and received in triumph; prisoners were set at liberty and honoured as martyrs; upon the walls of the churches religious pictures reappeared, and once more the figure of Christ, solemnly replaced over the Chalce Gate, bore witness to the piety of the masters of the Imperial Palace. At last, on the 19th of February, 843, clergy, court, and people, united in a solemn and magnificent ceremony. All night long in the church of Blachernae the Empress prayed devoutly with the priests. In the morning a triumphal procession wound through Constantinople; amid an enthusiastic crowd Theodora, surrounded by bishops and monks, went from Blachernae to St. Sophia, and gave thanks in the Great Church to the Almighty. Adherents of the defeated party were made to march in this procession that celebrated their downfall carrying candles and bending low under the anathemas that were hurled at them. That evening, the Basilissa gave a banquet to the prelates at the Sacred Palace, and rejoiced with them over the success of her

THE BLESSED THEODORA

undertaking. This was the Feast of Orthodoxy. And thereafter, in recollection of this great event and in memory of the Blessed Theodora, the Greek Church held a stately festival every year, on the First Sunday in Lent, to celebrate the restoration of the images and the discomfiture of their enemies. She celebrates it still with pious and grateful devotion.

In the revolution even the dead had a place. The remains of the illustrious confessors Theodore of Studion and the Patriarch Nicephorus, who had suffered for their faith and had died in distant exile, were brought back in triumph to the capital. The Empress and the entire court considered it an honour to go, candle in hand, to receive the venerated relics, to escort with reverence the reliquary borne on the shoulders of priests, and to accompany it through an enormous multitude, to the Church of the Holy Apostles. By way of contrast the tomb of Constantine V was violated, and, regardless of the Imperial Majesty, the remains of the great opponent of the images were cast into the gutter; his sarcophagus of green marble was cut up into thin slabs, and used to decorate one of the rooms in the Palace.

The Byzantine historians to whom we owe these details have unfortunately omitted to explain how this great revolution could have been accomplished so quickly, and, to all appearance, without encountering very serious difficulties. It would seem that the most important factor was the universal weariness at an interminable struggle. But a further motive may have induced statesmen to favour the decision which Theodora succeeded in carrying out. Although from the doctrinal point of view the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Church was completely victorious, she was obliged in return to renounce those leanings towards independence manifested by some of her most illustrious defenders. She was now absolutely subject to the State; imperial control in religious matters was more complete than ever before. To this extent, notwithstanding the re-establishment of Orthodoxy, the policy of the Iconoclastic Emperors had borne its fruit.

For the great work that she accomplished Theodora has been canonized by the Eastern Church. In carrying out her task, however, she was troubled by many pangs of conscience. One thing worried her above all others. As we know, she had loved her husband passionately, and she was unable to endure the thought that he was included in the terrible anathemas which had been hurled against the persecutors of the images. Therefore, when the Fathers assembled in the synod came to beseech her of her favour to restore the holy icons, she in turn made a request of them, — namely, that they should absolve the Emperor Theophilus. And when the Patriarch Methodius objected that, while the Church had the incontestable right to pardon living penitent sinners, she could do nothing for a man well known to have died in mortal sin, Theodora invented a pious falsehood. She asserted that in his last moments the Basileus had repented of his errors, had devoutly kissed the images that she had offered to his lips, and had commended his soul like a good Christian into the hands of God. The bishops readily accepted this edifying story, realising that it was the price of the restoration of Orthodoxy; and at the Regent's

THE BLESSED THEODORA

request they decided to offer prayers for a whole week in all the churches of the capital for the repose of the dead Emperor's soul. Theodora herself took part in these devotions, and trusted that she had thus won the mercy of God for the sinning but penitent Prince.

Legend in later times added many details to the touching story of Theodora's love for her husband. It was told how the Empress had learned in terrible dreams of the fate that threatened him. She had beheld the Virgin, with Christ in her arms, enthroned among the angels, summoning the Basileus Theophilus before her tribunal and having him cruelly flogged. On another occasion she had dreamed that she was in the Forum of Constantine when suddenly a great mob surged into it, and a procession passed through, of men carrying instruments of torture, dragging in their midst the wretched Theophilus, naked and in chains. Theodora had followed the crowd to the square in front of the Palace, before the Chalce Gate. There she had beheld, seated upon a throne, a tall man of terrible aspect, in the awful guise of a judge. The Empress, throwing herself at His feet, implored mercy for her husband, and the man answered: "Woman, great is thy faith. Because of thy piety and thy tears, and because of the prayers of My priests, I pardon Theophilus, thy husband." And He commanded the Emperor to be released. Simultaneously, the Patriarch Methodius made an experiment of his own to satisfy himself as to the designs of Providence. Upon the high altar of St. Sophia he laid a roll of parchment whereon he had written the names of all the Iconoclastic Em-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

perors; then he went to sleep in the church and saw in a dream an angel who told him that the Emperor had found mercy with God; and he affirmed that when, upon awaking, he had removed the parchment from the holy table, the place where he had written the name of Theophilus had become white again, in token of pardon.

Several men, however, proved more implacable than God. Lazarus, one of the most celebrated painters of icons, had had his right hand cut off by order of the deceased Emperor; and although, according to the legend, his hand had miraculously grown again, the martyr cherished a bitter hatred for his torturer, and to all that the Empress said answered obstinately: "God is not so unjust as to forget our sufferings and honour our persecutor." At the court banquet with which the Feast of Orthodoxy ended, another confessor proved no less intractable. This was Theodore Graptus, so called because Theophilus had had four defamatory verses stamped on his forehead with red-hot irons. The Empress, who was very anxious to flatter the martyrs, inquired of the holy man who it was who had inflicted so horrible a torture upon him. "For this inscription" he replied solemnly, "the Emperor your husband shall answer to me at God's judgement-seat." At this unexpected reply Theodora burst into tears, and, turning to the bishops, asked if it was thus that they intended to keep their promises. Fortunately the Patriarch Methodius intervened, and not without some difficulty managed to calm the irascible confessor and reassure the Empress. "Our promises stand" said he; "and if they weigh lightly

THE BLESSED THEODORA

upon some, that is of no importance." What is important, however, is the evidence that these anecdotes afford both of the various considerations of policy and humanity that entered into the restoration of Orthodoxy, and of the compromises which the holy bishops and the most pious Theodora arranged with equal facility with their conscience.

III

"Orthodoxy" says a chronicler of the time, "is the greatest virtue." Theodora possessed it in its fullness. But she had other qualities as well. Byzantine historians praise her political astuteness, her energy, and her courage; they put into her mouth such heroic speeches as that by which she was said to have stopped an invasion on the part of the Bulgarian king: "If you triumph over a woman, you will reap no glory thereby; but if you are beaten by one, you will be the laughing-stock of the whole world." At all events, she governed well during her fourteen years of rule. Her government had, to be sure, a religious colour. She was very proud of having restored Orthodoxy, and was no less anxious to combat heresy; by her order the Paulicians were given their choice between conversion and death, and as they refused to yield, blood flowed freely in the parts of Asia Minor where they were established. The imperial inquisitors who were sent to crush their resistance did wonders: they succeeded in putting more than one hundred thousand of them to death by torture — a serious matter, destined to have still more serious consequences. For by throwing these desperate men into the arms of the Mohammedans,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

the imperial government was preparing many troubles for itself in the future.

But in other ways the Regent's pious zeal inspired her to happier undertakings; it was she who laid the foundations of the great missionary enterprise which a few years later carried the Gospel to the Khazars, the Moravians, and the Bulgars. She had also the glory of inflicting several lasting defeats upon the Arabs, and of repressing vigorously the insurrection of the Slavs of Hellas. But her chief concern was the financial administration of the Empire. She is said to have had a talent for money-making, and an amusing anecdote is told in this connexion. One day, as the Emperor Theophilus was standing at a window of the Palace, he saw a large and splendid merchant-vessel entering the Golden Horn. Upon inquiring the name of the owner, he was told that it belonged to the Empress. He said nothing; but the next day, as he was going to Blachernae, he went down to the harbour, had the vessel unloaded, and ordered the cargo to be set on fire. Then, turning to his friends, he remarked: "You were not aware that the Empress my wife had made a merchant of me! Never before has a Roman Emperor been a shop-keeper." Whether or not the story is true, Theodora managed the wealth of the State as successfully as her own. On laying down the power, she left a large balance in the Treasury. And on this account she would doubtless have been reckoned a great sovereign, had it not been for court intrigues and palace rivalries, always of rapid growth under a woman's government, and for the miserable son that Heaven had sent her.

THE BLESSED THEODORA

IV

During the reign of Theophilus the Imperial Palace, for so many centuries the residence of the Byzantine Basileis, had acquired new splendour. The Emperor was fond of building, and to the old constructions of Constantine and of Justinian had added a series of magnificent edifices, decorated with the most elegant and exquisite luxury. He loved pomp and splendour, and to enhance the magnificence of the Palace receptions had ordered miraculous products of the goldsmith's and the mechanic's arts. Among them were the Pentapyrgion, a celebrated golden cabinet in which the crown jewels were exhibited; the golden organs that were played on days of solemn audience; the golden plane-tree standing near the imperial throne, on which mechanical birds fluttered and sang; the golden lions crouching at the Prince's feet, which at certain times rose up and lashed their tails, and roared; and the mysterious golden gryphons which seemed to watch over the ruler's safety as in the palaces of Asiatic kings. Furthermore, he had entirely renewed the imperial wardrobe — the beautiful costumes glittering with gold that the Basileus wore in the court ceremonies, the splendid vestments of golden tissue studded with precious stones in which the Augusta arrayed herself. He was a patron of letters, science, and art. He had showered favours upon the great mathematician, Leo of Thessalonica, and in the Palace of Magnaura had founded a school where that scholar imparted the teaching that was one of the glories of Byzantium. He himself, Iconoclast

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

though he was, had become very tolerant of the confessor Methodius from the moment that the latter proved his ability to solve certain scientific problems in which the Emperor was absorbed. Arabic architecture was much to his taste, and as he was very anxious to replace religious painting by a freer, more secular style, he had turned the Byzantine art of his time into new channels. Owing to his efforts and intelligent protection, court life in the marvellous Sacred Palace, full of the refinements of splendour and rare luxury, with its incomparable pavilions and terraces, its gardens grandly opening upon the luminous reaches of the Marmora, had taken on a new effulgence. But now that the Emperor was dead, this glorious Palace was the scene of quarrels and intrigues.

Under the regency of Theodora the real head of government was the Logothete Theoctistus. He was a man of no great merit, an incapable and always unfortunate general, a statesman of but moderate acumen, by temperament cold, melancholy, and harsh. He was unsympathetic and unloved, and maintained himself in power by the Empress's favour. Apartments had been assigned to him in the Palace itself. He exercised an enormous influence over Theodora, so that scandalous reports were current in Byzantium concerning his relations with her. He was known to be ambitious, and people remembered the feverish haste with which he had left the army in Crete at the false news of a palace revolution, in order to observe events in the capital. He was suspected of aspiring to the throne, and it was even reported that Theodora approved his desires,

THE BLESSED THEODORA

and that she intended either to marry him herself or to give him one of her daughters in marriage. It was said that, in order to smooth his path to power, she was quite prepared, like the great Irene, to dethrone and blind her own son. At all events, being deeply devoted to the Regent, and with unbounded influence over her, the Logothete did his best to arouse her distrust against all the counsellors who shared the power with him.

By his intrigues he speedily rid himself of rivals. The Magister Manuel, tutor with Theoctistus of the young Michael III, was accused of conspiring against the imperial family and forced to resign office. The Empress's brothers, Petronas and Bardas, were more formidable, especially the latter, whose great intelligence was combined with a total absence of scruples and morals. With Theodora's own consent Bardas was, on some pretext, exiled from court, and the Logothete imagined that his own power was definitely established. He had not realised that he should have to reckon with the young Emperor.

For Michael III was growing up, and as he grew he shewed himself utterly worthless. In vain his mother and the minister had done their utmost to give him an excellent education; in vain he had been entrusted to the best masters, surrounded by the most carefully chosen companions — legend includes among the Prince Imperial's comrades Cyril, later the Apostle of the Slavs. All had been useless, for Michael was fundamentally corrupt. He was now fifteen or sixteen years of age, and cared chiefly for horses, hunting, racing, shows, and athletic contests, and he even stooped to the point of making

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

an exhibition of himself before his associates by driving a chariot in the palace hippodrome. His private life was still worse. He frequented the lowest society, spending part of his nights in drinking; and he had an acknowledged mistress, Eudocia Ingerina.

Theodora and Theoctistus decided that the only thing to be done was to find him a wife as soon as possible. Palace envoys once more searched the provinces for the most beautiful girls in the Empire, and brought them to Constantinople; from among them, Eudocia, a girl of the Decapolis, was chosen and at once crowned Basilissa. But in a few weeks' time Michael tired of his wife and of marriage, returned to his former habits, his friends, and his mistress, and launched once more into excesses. All the ridiculous and odious tales that Byzantine historians tell about Michael III must be accepted with reserve; for the chroniclers of the Macedonian dynasty were too anxious to excuse and justify the assassination by which Basil I won the throne not to be tempted to blacken his victim a little. But, notwithstanding this reservation, undoubted facts testify to the insanity of the wretched Emperor's behaviour. Constantly surrounded by actors, debauchees, and clowns, he and his unworthy familiars amused themselves by playing grotesque or filthy jests, he scandalised the Palace with his shocking practical jokes, and he respected neither his family nor his faith. A favourite amusement was to dress himself and his friends as bishops; one took the part of the Patriarch, and the others represented metropolitans; he himself assumed the title of Archbishop of Colonaea; and thus they went masquerading through the city, singing

THE BLESSED THEODORA

disgusting songs and parodying the holy ceremonies. One day, in imitation of Christ, Michael went to dine at the house of a poor woman, all aghast at receiving the Basileus so unexpectedly. Another time, meeting the Patriarch Ignatius in the streets with his clergy, the Emperor improvised a sort of vaudeville entertainment, and with his retinue of actors accompanied them for some distance, singing them licentious songs, to the sound of cymbals and tambourines.

His mother was the next victim of his disgusting jokes. He sent her word one day that the Patriarch was calling at the Palace, and that she would doubtless like to receive his blessing. The pious Theodora came in haste, and in the great Golden Triclinium found the prelate in full canonicals sitting on a throne beside the sovereign, his cowl pulled down over his face, and apparently lost in deep thought. The Regent fell at the holy man's feet and begged him to remember her in his prayers, when all of a sudden the Patriarch got up, made a few pirouettes, presented his back to the Empress . . . and one must consult the chroniclers to discover what he emitted in Theodora's face. Then he turned around and remarked: "You can hardly say, Madam, that even in this we have not tried our best to do you honour"; and, throwing back his cowl, the Patriarch proved to be none other than the Emperor's favourite jester. Michael burst into fits of laughter at this charming pleasantry, while Theodora called down curses upon him, saying: "You wicked child! God has this day withdrawn his help from you!" and left the room in tears. But, in spite of so many evidences of boorish

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

impropriety, his tutors dared not interfere, and, whether from excessive indulgence, or because they hoped to curry favour, were careful not to reprimand him.

But it was Bardas, chiefly, who tolerated his nephew's amusements and so acquired an ascendancy over him. Through the good offices of his friend, the Lord Chamberlain Damianus, he had succeeded in having the Emperor recall him from exile, and very soon ingratiated himself into Michael's favour. Naturally, he detested Theoctistus, who stood in his way, and he was constantly playing upon the Basileus's distrust of the minister. He hinted that the Logothete was preparing some *coup d'état*, and did not hesitate to slander his sister, the Regent Theodora, presenting her conduct in the worst possible light. He succeeded so well that an unimportant incident (the minister had refused advancement to some friend of the sovereign's) grew into a violent quarrel between Michael and Theoctistus. This was in 856. Bardas took advantage of it to inflame Michael's bitterness still further; he told him that he was being kept out of politics, and nettled his vanity by cynical remarks. "So long as Theoctistus and the Augusta are together" he used to say, "the Basileus will be powerless"; and he contrived to persuade the Emperor that his life was threatened. A plot was formed against the Logothete. A great number of the courtiers was won over to Bardas's side; the Prince agreed to everything; even a sister of the Empress joined with Bardas, her brother, against Theodora and her favourite. Thus the conspiracy succeeded without great difficulty.

THE BLESSED THEODORA

One day, in the discharge of his duties, when coming with papers in his hand for an audience with the Regent, Theoctistus, in the gallery of the Lausiacus, which led to the Empress's apartments, discovered Bardas, who did not rise at his approach, but looked him up and down most insolently. A little further on he met the Emperor, who forbade him to go to the Augusta, and ordered the Logothete to make his daily report to him. As the minister hesitated in astonishment, the Basileus dismissed him roughly; but as he was leaving, Michael cried out to the chamberlains in waiting: "Arrest that man!" Thereupon Bardas threw himself on the Logothete, who fled; Bardas caught up with him, knocked him down, and drew his sword to prevent anyone from coming to the poor man's rescue. It does not seem, however, as if the death of Theoctistus had been an essential part of the programme; at first, the Emperor simply commanded that he should be taken under close guard to the vestibule of the Scyla, there to await his commands. Unfortunately for the Logothete, the noise had alarmed Theodora, who came running, in disordered attire, her hair dishevelled, demanding the release of her favourite, inveighing against her son and her brother, and crying that she forbade anyone to put Theoctistus to death. It was perhaps her eagerness for his safety that cost him his life. Michael's companions feared, if he were allowed to live, that the Regent would restore him to power, and that he would then take cruel vengeance upon his enemies; for safety's sake they decided upon his death. In vain some of the guard-officers who had remained faithful to him tried to

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

defend him; in vain the poor wretch hid under the furniture, attempting to avoid his fate. A soldier bent down and with a thrust of his sword ran him through the belly, and Bardas finished him off.

The assassination of the Prime Minister was a direct blow at Theodora, and she took it as such. In the mist of the tumult she had heard menacing voices crying out against her; people had shouted to her to beware, that it was the day of murders. Moreover, in her wrath she refused all excuses and all consolation. Savagely, tragically, she invoked the vengeance of Heaven upon the murderers, but chiefly upon her brother Bardas, and openly prayed for their death. By taking this unyielding stand she made herself irksome; and Bardas, whose ambitions she hindered, decided to get rid of her. First, her daughters were taken away and put into a convent, in the expectation that she would soon follow them there of her own free will. As she still hesitated, she was ordered to retire to the convent of Gastria. Not wishing to trouble the State by a useless resistance, she nobly resigned the power, after having delivered officially to the Senate the moneys which under her sound financial administration had been deposited in the Treasury. It was the end of her political career.

In the convent where she found refuge, Theodora lived piously with her daughters for many long years, forgiving her son, over whom she seems later to have regained some influence; but always bitterly opposed to Bardas, whom she justly held responsible for the death of Theoctistus. To such a pitch did she carry her hatred that she, the pious, orthodox

THE BLESSED THEODORA

Empress, plotted against the brother she loathed, and tried, with the help of some of her friends at court, to have him assassinated. She failed in the attempt, and seems to have been rather severely punished for it. It was doubtless on this occasion that all her property was confiscated, and that she was deprived of the honours attached to her imperial rank. But to console her for her disgrace, fate was to raise up an avenger, destined to satisfy her hate even beyond her hopes. This was Basil, the illustrious founder of the Macedonian dynasty.

VII

THE ROMANTIC ADVENTURES OF BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

I

IN the days when the Empress Theodora shared the throne with her husband Theophilus, towards the year 840, a young man in shabby clothes, but with a fine, upstanding appearance, due to his height, strength, and healthy complexion, with his pack on his back and his staff in his hand, entered Constantinople one evening by the Golden Gate. It was Sunday, and night was coming on. Tired and dusty, the traveller lay down in the porch of the neighbouring Church of St. Diomed, and was soon fast asleep. Now, during the night the abbot of the monastery to which the church belonged awoke suddenly, and heard a voice saying to him: "Get up, and go and open the door of the church for the Emperor." The monk obeyed; but seeing the court deserted, except for a poor fellow in rags asleep on the stones, he thought he had been dreaming, and went back to bed. Then a second time the voice awoke him and repeated the same order; getting up again and seeing no one but the sleeper, he returned to bed once more. At last the voice sounded a third time in the silence, more imperiously than ever, and so that he should not doubt he was awake, the

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

abbot received a rough, mysterious punch in the ribs. "Get up" said the voice, "and bring in him who lies before the door. He is the Emperor." The holy man, trembling, left his cell in haste, and went down and called to the stranger. "Here I am, master" answered the latter, rousing himself, "what orders have you for your slave?" The abbot bade him follow, and set him at his table; the next day he made him bathe, and gave him new clothes; and as the astonished traveller was unable to understand the consideration with which he was being treated, the monk, under pledge of secrecy, imparted to him the mystery of his future, and asked him to be henceforth his friend and brother.

It was thus picturesquely — Paul Adam has made ingenious use of it in his novel *Basile et Sophia* — that, during the reign of Theodora and Michael III, Basil the Macedonian made his entrance into history, and guided his fortunes with such success that a few years later he set himself and his family upon the throne of Byzantium.

The historians who lived at the court of Constantine VII, Basil's grandson, as well as Constantine himself, were naturally eager to make out a respectable and even a glorious genealogy for the founder of the dynasty. If they are to be believed, the illustrious Basileus was descended through his father from the royal family of Armenia, and on his mother's side from Constantine and even from Alexander the Great. But his true ancestry seems to have been far more modest. Basil was of humble origin, having been born about the year 812 near Adrianople of an obscure peasant family, poor settlers of Ar-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

menian extraction, transplanted by circumstances to Macedonia. The Bulgarian war had ruined them; and by a final misfortune, the father's death, they were left destitute. Basil, the sole support of his mother and sisters, was at that time twenty-five or -six years of age. He was a big, strapping fellow, with powerful hands and broad shoulders; his energetic face was framed in thick, curly hair. He was absolutely illiterate, unable either to read or write — just a splendid human animal. But that was enough to make his fortune.

The Byzantine chroniclers, with their love of the marvellous, have scrupulously set down the omens that foretold Basil's future greatness; how, one fine summer's day, as he was lying asleep in the fields, an eagle flying over the child had shadowed him with his wings; how his mother had dreamed that a golden tree, laden with flowers and fruits of gold, had sprung from her womb, and grown and overshadowed the whole house; and how, on another occasion, she had seen in a dream St. Elijah the Tishbite, in the guise of an old man with a white beard, emitting flames from his mouth, who had told her of the high destiny awaiting her son. Byzantine superstition delighted in thus embellishing the youth of great men, and these predictions were firmly believed. But it was in fact by other means and other qualities, his adroitness and pliancy, his unscrupulous energy, his physical strength, and his influence with women, to whom the charm of his athletic vigour made a powerful appeal, that Basil the Macedonian was destined to succeed.

In his own poor Macedonia Basil, who had charge

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

of the family, soon came to realise that farming would never suffice for their support; and he began by taking service with the governor of the province. Then he went to seek his fortune in Constantinople, where circumstances proved as favourable as could be desired. The Abbot of St. Diomed, his host, had a brother who was a physician; he saw the young man at the monastery, found him a well set-up, nice-looking fellow, and recommended him to one of his patients, a relative of Bardas and of the Emperor's, Theophilus by name, who on account of his small stature was nicknamed Theophilizes (little Theophilus). This little man had a mania for servants of great height and Herculean strength, whom he clothed in magnificent silks; and nothing gave him greater pleasure than to appear in public with his escort of giants. No sooner had he heard of Basil than he wanted to see him, and, having done so, he was delighted with his appearance, engaged him on the spot to groom his horses, and bestowed on him the nickname of Cephalas, or "Strong-head."

Basil remained in the service of Theophilizes for several years, and it was during this time that he met with an adventure that made his fortune. His master having been sent on a mission to Greece, Basil, in his capacity of groom, accompanied him; but on the journey he fell ill, and was obliged to remain behind in Patras. There he met Danielis. Danielis was a rich widow, no longer in her first youth; when Basil met her she had a grown son, and it seems that she was even a grandmother. But her fortune was enormous, "the fortune of a king" says the chronicler, "rather than of a private person."

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

She owned slaves by the thousand, immense estates, innumerable herds, factories where women wove magnificent silks, beautiful carpets, and linens of marvellous fineness. Her house was full of sumptuous services of silver and gold, and her cupboards of splendid clothes; her strong-boxes were stuffed with ingots of precious metals. She owned a large part of the Peloponnesus, and seemed indeed, as an historian says, "the queen of the country." She loved pomp and luxury; on her journeys she used neither carriage nor horse, but had a litter with three hundred slaves to accompany it, carrying it in relays. She also loved handsome men — wherefore Basil interested her. Must we imagine that she too, as the superstitious chroniclers intimate, had premonitions of the Macedonian's glorious future? I believe rather that her sympathy sprang from more material causes. At all events, she welcomed him warmly to her house; and when Basil at last decided to leave, presented him with money, clothes, and thirty slaves to wait upon him. Thus the poor fellow became a fine gentleman, and was able to cut a figure in the world and buy estates in Macedonia.

He never forgot his benefactress. Twenty years later, when he ascended the throne, his first thought was to give Danielis's son a high position at court; and then he invited the old lady, "who", it is said, "was very desirous of seeing the Emperor again", to visit him in the capital. He received her in the Palace of Magnaura as if she were an Empress, and solemnly conferred upon her the title of Mother of the Basileus. Danielis on her part, magnificent as ever, had brought precious gifts for her old friend;

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

she presented him with five hundred slaves, a hundred eunuchs, a hundred astonishingly expert embroiderers, splendid fabrics, and much more besides. Nor did she stop there. Basil was engaged at the time upon the construction of the New Church; she was anxious to share in this pious work, and offered to have all the prayer-rugs with which the entire floor was to be covered woven in her Peloponnesian factories. Lastly, she promised to remember in her will her son and former favourite. Then she returned to Patras; but every year thereafter, so long as Basil lived, his old friend sent him splendid presents from Greece; and when he died, predeceasing her, she transferred to the Emperor's son the affection she had felt for the father. She returned once more to Constantinople to see him, and in her will appointed him her sole heir. When the imperial envoy, sent to make an inventory of the estate, reached her house, he was astounded at such unparalleled wealth. Not to speak of coined money, jewellery, precious services, and thousands of slaves — the Emperor freed three thousand whom he sent as colonists to southern Italy — the Basileus inherited more than twenty-four estates. From this one can form some idea of the wealth of the Byzantine Empire in the ninth century and of the enormous fortunes enjoyed by the great families of the provincial aristocracy — families that played so great a part in the history of the monarchy. But above all, is she not a curious and piquante figure — this old lady whose carefully cultivated friendship proved so useful to the Macedonian house?

On his return from Patras to Constantinople Basil

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

had re-entered Theophilitzes's service, when an unforeseen incident brought him to the notice of the Emperor. One day a cousin of Michael III's, the Patrician Antigonus, son of Bardas, was giving a banquet in honour of his father; he had invited many of his friends, senators, and important people, as well as some Bulgarian ambassadors who were passing through Constantinople. In accordance with the custom at Byzantine feasts, wrestlers came in at dessert-time to amuse the guests; whereupon the Bulgarians with their usual boastfulness, being somewhat excited after dinner, began singing the praises of a certain athlete of their own race, saying that he was invincible and could defeat anyone who dared stand up to him. They were taken at their word; and, as a matter of fact, the barbarian champion threw all his adversaries. The Byzantines were greatly humiliated, and even more irritated; Theophilitzes, who was present, remarked, however: "There's a man in my service who can equal your Bulgarian, and if you like I'll send for him. For really it would be shameful for us Romans if this stranger should go back home without meeting his match." The proposal was accepted; Basil was sent for; the floor was carefully sanded; and the fight began. The Bulgarian, with his powerful arm, tried to lift Basil off the ground and make him lose his balance; but the latter was even stronger, and, raising his opponent, turned him around, and by a clever throw that was very celebrated among wrestlers at the time, threw him on the ground breathless and bruised.

This exploit attracted the attention of the court-

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

iers to the Macedonian. It happened that a few days later the Emperor received from a provincial governor the present of a very fine horse, which he immediately wished to try. But when he came up to open the horse's mouth and look at his teeth, the creature reared and plunged so that neither the Emperor nor his grooms could manage him. Michael was very much put out; but Theophilitzes obligingly came to the rescue, saying: "Sir, I have a strong young man who is very clever at managing horses; his name is Basil, if Your Majesty cares to send for him." The Macedonian was immediately summoned to the Palace, and when he arrived leaped to the animal's back "like Alexander upon Bucephalus", to quote an historian, "like Bellerophon upon Pegasus", and soon was able to control him perfectly. The Basileus was enraptured, and gave Theophilitzes no peace until this likely fellow who was so good a groom and so strong a wrestler had been turned over to him. Then in his pride of acquisition he presented Basil to his mother, Theodora, saying: "Come and see the splendid creature I've discovered." But the Empress, after gazing searchingly at the new favourite's face, said sadly to herself: "Would to heaven I had never set eyes upon this man! for he will destroy our house."

Theodora was right. This athlete who had such success with women was to shew himself capable of other things. It was in 856 that he entered the service of Michael III; eleven years later he was Emperor.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

II

At the time of Basil's arrival at court, Bardas, the uncle of the Basileus, was becoming all-powerful. The assassination of Theoctistus and the retirement of Theodora soon made him the real head of the government; he was nominated successively Magister and Domestic of the Scholae, soon afterwards, Curopalates, finally he was almost associated in the imperial power with the title of Caesar, and ruled as master in Michael's name.

Bardas, in spite of his vices, was a remarkable man. He was devoured by ambition and passionately eager for power, wealth, and luxury; but at the same time he prided himself on being a good administrator, a stern judge, and an incorruptible minister; consequently, notwithstanding his unscrupulousness and profound immorality, he became very popular. He was extremely intelligent, was fond of letters, and took an interest in science. The honour is his of having founded the University of Magnaura, to which he called the most distinguished masters of the times. Grammar, philosophy, geometry, and astronomy were taught; and to encourage the zeal of the professors and the ardour of the students Bardas paid it frequent and careful visits. Among his intimate friends and associates he numbered the famous Leo of Thessalonica, an eminent mathematician and a renowned philosopher and physician, one of the greatest men of the ninth century, who like all the important scholars of the Middle Ages had an evil reputation among his contemporaries for being a soothsayer and a magician. And in other ways,

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

doubtless, Bardas scandalised the town and the court. He was suspected of improper relations with his daughter-in-law; this was the chief cause of the serious quarrel that broke out between him and the Patriarch Ignatius, when the latter decided that he ought to forbid the all-powerful Regent to enter St. Sophia. But even Bardas's enemies had to recognise his great qualities. During his administration several noteworthy victories were won over the Arabs; the bold attempt of the Russians upon Constantinople was vigorously repulsed; most important of all, with the help of Ignatius's successor, Photius, Bardas had the glory of bringing to a successful result the great work of evangelizing the Moravians and Bulgarians. For it was under his protection that Cyril and Methodius, the Apostles of the Slavs, undertook their splendid mission, by which a whole race was won to Orthodoxy.

While the Caesar was thus governing, the Emperor continued on his mad career. He spent on ridiculous excesses the money that his parents had amassed, and astonished and shocked the capital by his unbounded love for horses and racing. He had built a magnificent stable, decorated like a palace with the most precious marbles, and was prouder of it than Justinian of St. Sophia. He spent his time in the company of charioteers, gave them large gifts of money, and even stood godfather to their children; he himself presided at the races in the Hippodrome in charioteer's costume, and often drove his horses in person on the private race-track of the Palace of St. Mamas, making the high officials of the Empire imitate him, wear the colours of the circus factions, and

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

compete with him for the prize. And in a scandalous spirit of mockery he set an image of the Virgin on the imperial throne to preside over the festivities in his place.

When Michael III was engaged in amusement, he would not permit himself to be disturbed upon any pretext. One day, when he was in the Hippodrome, word was sent to him that the Arabs had invaded the Asiatic provinces; and as the messenger from the Domestic of the Scholae stood before the Basileus, anxiously awaiting the imperial orders, Michael suddenly exclaimed: "What audacity to come and bother me about such things when I am busy with a very important race, and trying to decide whether or not the right-hand chariot will smash at the turn." Between the Cilician frontier and the capital there was a system of beacon-fires in operation, a sort of optical telegraph, by which Mohammedan inroads were promptly notified to the Government; Michael had it destroyed, saying that it distracted the people's attention on holidays, and that bad news sent in this way saddened the spectators and prevented them from deriving full pleasure from the games. We have described his debauchery, and the practical jokes he delighted in with his crew of actors and clowns; he also drank to excess, and is known in history as Michael the Drunkard. After drinking, when he was no longer responsible for what he said, he would unconcernedly order executions or invent the worst excesses. The only way to please him was by joining in these strange diversions, and everyone at court did his best to do so. The Patriarch Photius himself is said to have found the Emperor's enter-

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

tainments very amusing, and he often got the best of him by drinking him under the table. At all events, Basil quickly learned that that was one way of getting ahead.

He had the wit to join in everything, to consent to everything, and to profit by everything. In 856 the office of Master of the Horse fell vacant, the occupant having conspired against the Emperor, and Basil got it. In 862 the Lord Chamberlain Damianus, Bardas's former friend, was removed for having been disrespectful to the Caesar with whom he had quarrelled, and Basil succeeded him in this confidential position, which brought the occupant into close relations with the sovereign. Michael doted upon his favourite, and told everyone that the Macedonian was his only really faithful and devoted servant. Accordingly, he created him patrician, and finally arranged a marriage for him. As a matter of fact, Basil had a wife already, a Macedonian like himself, named Mary; but the Basileus made him divorce her, and Mary was given some money and sent back to her native province. Thereupon the Emperor married his friend to his mistress, Eudocia Ingerina.

She was a very beautiful woman, whom Michael had loved for many years, and still loved; in fact, he stipulated when she was married that she should continue to be his mistress, and the contract was so faithfully observed that the unofficial chroniclers say explicitly that the Emperor was the father of Basil's two eldest children. The court historians are naturally more discreet on so delicate a question, and content themselves with praising not only Eudocia's beauty and grace, but her wisdom and

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

virtue as well; and their very insistence on this point shews that it was always a sore subject with the Macedonian house. Basil seems to have adapted himself without difficulty to this embarrassing situation; he managed to find consolation elsewhere. He was the lover of the Emperor's sister, Thecla; and Michael winked at the arrangement like Basil at his wife's adultery. It was the neatest arrangement imaginable.

Basil, to be sure, was not so accommodating for nothing. Beneath the surface of this finished, pliant courtier Bardas easily discerned the Macedonian adventurer's secret and persevering ambition. "I have turned out the fox" he said to his friends after the downfall of Damianus, "but in his place I have put a lion who will end by devouring us all." And there soon began, in fact, a keen struggle between the favourite and the minister. Basil did his best to persuade the Emperor that the Caesar sought his life; but Michael only laughed at these absurd accusations. Then, to achieve his purpose, the intriguing Macedonian sought an accomplice; he had a talk with Symbatius, Bardas's son-in-law, and with the most solemn oaths confided to him that the Emperor esteemed him highly and was very well disposed toward him, but that his father-in-law alone stood in the way of his due promotion. This done, Basil returned to the attack upon the Emperor and called upon Symbatius to corroborate his charges. The latter, duped and furious, did not hesitate to join Basil in swearing that Bardas was actually conspiring. Greatly shaken by these statements, Michael came little by little to entertain the idea of

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

proceeding against the minister. But the Caesar was powerful; in Constantinople he was as much respected as the Emperor, and even more. Through his son Antigonus, the commander-in-chief of the guard, he controlled the troops in the capital; to take any measures against him in Byzantium was to court certain defeat. In order to find a suitable occasion, Bardas would have to be separated from his supporters. The Emperor was therefore induced to proclaim a campaign in Asia against the Arabs; Bardas would be obliged to accompany the Basileus, and would thus be defenseless in the hands of his enemies.

The Cæsar was aware of all these intrigues, and his friends advised him to take defensive precautions, and to say point-blank that he would not accompany the Emperor to the army. Superstitious folk, naturally, discovered all sorts of ominous signs foretelling the minister's impending doom. It was said that one day, when he was in church, absorbed in prayer, he had suddenly felt an invisible hand behind him plucking off his mantle of state. An unexpected gift sent him by his sister Theodora was unfavourably interpreted; this was a costume embroidered with golden partridges that proved too short. The soothsayers were agreed that partridges symbolised treachery, and that too short a garment meant death. Bardas himself was troubled with bad dreams. He dreamt that he was entering St. Sophia in solemn procession at the Emperor's side, when suddenly in the apse of the church he saw St. Peter enthroned among angels, and at his feet the Patriarch Ignatius demanding justice against his perse-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

cutors. The Apostle, holding out a sword to a golden-vested attendant, bade the Emperor go to his right hand, but the Caesar to his left, and ordered him to be struck with the sword. But Bardas was too intelligent and strong-minded to take much stock in such matters. Moreover, the Emperor and his favourite were at the greatest pains to restore his confidence so that they might entrap him the more easily. Before starting for the front, they both went with the Caesar to the Church of St. Mary of Chalcoopratia, and there, in the presence of the Patriarch Photius, who witnessed their oath, they both swore solemnly upon the Blood of Christ that Bardas had nothing to fear from them. The Regent was almost convinced, and he decided to accompany the court. Basil, thrice perjured, had compassed his ends.

The chroniclers favourable to the Macedonian dynasty have done their utmost to exculpate Basil from the murder of Bardas, and have exerted themselves to prove that he played no part in the tragedy. But the facts are otherwise. The army and the court had crossed over to Asia. Basil, with the small band of conspirators, consisting of his brothers, some relatives, and some intimate friends, whom he had made a party to the project, held himself in readiness to await the Emperor's orders; and to precipitate matters he and his accomplices excited Michael's ill will against his uncle, and called attention to the Caesar's insolence in pitching his tent on an eminence overlooking the imperial pavilion. Bardas was perfectly aware of the plot; but, scorning danger, treated his friends' warnings lightly, and trusted to

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

his star, thinking his enemies would not dare attack him. To shew how little he feared danger, he put on a sumptuous habit, and with a large retinue went on horseback early in the morning, as was the custom, to the imperial audience. Basil was waiting for him. In his capacity of Lord Chamberlain, it was his duty to receive the Caesar, and, holding him by the hand, to bring him into the presence of the Basileus. On entering the tent Bardas sat down beside the Emperor, and engaged in conversation with him. Then Michael indicated by winking at his friends that the moment had come. When the signal had been given the Logothete Symbatius left the imperial pavilion, and making, by a preconcerted arrangement, the sign of the cross upon his face, notified the assassins, and admitted them into the rear of the tent. Basil was already standing behind Bardas, containing himself, with difficulty and making threatening gestures towards the minister, when suddenly the Caesar turned around, and understood. Feeling that he was lost, he threw himself at Michael's feet, and implored his protection. But Basil drew his sword; at this signal the conspirators fell upon their victim, and under the very eyes of the impassive or powerless Emperor hacked the unfortunate Caesar to pieces. To such a point did they vent their rage upon the bleeding corpse that with difficulty a few shapeless fragments of it were gathered up; these were buried in the same Gastria monastery to which Theodora had been forced by her brother's orders to retire.

The official version, obviously invented to excuse this cowardly murder, was to the effect that the con-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

spirators, after much hesitation, had acted solely to save the Emperor's life, which had been threatened; and that in the tumult following the murder Michael III had been in the greatest danger. But this story deceived no one. That finished courtier, the Patriarch Photius, to be sure, made haste to congratulate the Emperor on having escaped so great a peril; but the people, who were more sincere, and had loved Bardas, cried out at the sovereign as he passed by: "This is a fine thing that you have done, Basileus — killing your relative and shedding the blood of your own kin! Woe unto you! Woe unto you!"

III

Basil was winning. A few weeks later, the Emperor, who had no children, adopted him and made him Magister. A little later he created him co-Emperor.

On Pentecost of the year 866 the people were astonished to see two thrones set up in St. Sophia, and the gossips were vastly puzzled, saying to one another that there was but one Basileus. Soon it was all explained. At the usual time the imperial procession entered the basilica; Michael III walked in front in full state costume; Basil followed him carrying the insignia and the Lord Chamberlain's sword. With resolute pace the Emperor advanced to the iconostasis and stood upon the topmost step; below him stood Basil; lower still were grouped the imperial secretary, the Grand Master of the Court, or Praepositus, and the chiefs of the factions, who represented the official people. Then, in the presence of

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

the court and of the assembled crowd, the imperial secretary read a proclamation from the Basileus, as follows: "The Caesar Bardas conspired against me to put me to death, and to that end lured me forth from the capital. And, had it not been for the timely warnings of Symbatius and of Basil, I should no longer be among the living. But he fell the victim of his own transgression. I therefore order that Basil the Parakoimomenos, my faithful servant and guardian of my Majesty, who delivered me from my enemy, and who loves me, be henceforth the guardian and administrator of my Empire, and that he be by all acclaimed Emperor." Basil was much moved and burst into tears at this proclamation, which was doubtless no surprise to him. Then Michael, after giving his own crown to the Patriarch to be blessed, set it upon Basil's head, while the *praepositi* vested him with the *dibetesion* and with the red boots. And in accordance with the prescribed etiquette the people shouted: "Long live the Emperors Michael and Basil!"

Gratitude had never been the Macedonian's dominant quality. When his late accomplices, and chiefly Symbatius, demanded their share of honours and power, he, having no further need of them, unhesitatingly sent them about their business; and when in their discontent they raised a revolt, he suppressed it sternly. But with such a Prince as Michael favour that seemed most deeply rooted was always uncertain — the more so since many of the courtiers, jealous of the favourite's rapid elevation, tried their best to undermine his influence and persuade Michael that his new colleague wished to

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

put him to death. Basil did what he could; he went to the imperial feasts; he drank with the sovereign; he allowed him to take all sorts of liberties with his wife Eudocia. With so inconstant and fickle a person as Michael he had always to fear for his power and for his very life.

He soon had clear proof of the danger that threatened him. One evening, in honour of a victory that the Basileus had won at the races, a state dinner was given at the Palace of St. Mamas. During dessert one of the guests, the patrician Basiliscianus, whom the sovereign liked, began to compliment the Emperor upon the ability and success with which he had driven his chariot. Michael, already rather drunk, thereupon had an odd fancy, such as often came to him in his cups, and said to the patrician: "Get up and take off my red shoes, and put them on, yourself." The patrician, in amazement, looked questioningly at Basil, whereat the Emperor became angry, and ordered him to obey at once; then turning to his colleague he said ironically: "I swear, I think they look better on him than on you"; and he began to improvise verses in honour of his new favourite:

"Behold him all, with admiration!
Is he not fit to rule the nation?
Such beauty merits coronation,
Since all unite in adulation."

Basil raged in silence; Eudocia burst into tears and tried to make Michael behave himself, saying: "Sir, the imperial dignity is a very great one; it must not be dishonoured." But Michael, getting

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

drunker and drunker, answered laughingly: "Don't you worry about that, my dear. It amuses me to make Basiliscianus Emperor."

Perhaps Theodora, who seems to have returned to her son's good graces, was also intriguing against Basil and trying to overthrow him. The fact remains that the Macedonian, feeling that his colleague was slipping away from him, decided it was time to have done with it all. In order to palliate the final scene of the drama Basil's grandson, Constantine VII, has done his best to paint Michael in the blackest colours; in a violent indictment he gathers together the tales of all his excesses, his scandals, and his crimes. Nevertheless, he dared not tell the part played by his ancestor in the murder of his master and benefactor. Here again, however, the facts do not admit of doubt.

On the 23rd of September, 867, the Emperor was supping at the Palace of St. Mamas. In spite of the denunciations he had received against Basil, in spite of the hatred he now felt towards his former friend, he had invited his imperial colleague, with his wife, Eudocia, to the meal. As usual, the sovereign had drunk deeply; and it was well known that when he was intoxicated he was capable of anything. Basil was determined to act, and a few days earlier he had come to an understanding with most of those who had previously helped to rid him of Bardas. Deciding that the hour had struck, he left the banqueting-hall on some pretext, and going to the imperial bedchamber forced the locks with his powerful hands, so as to prevent the Emperor from fastening them. Then he returned to his place at table.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Eudocia, as usual, was exercising her fascinations upon her lover. Late at night, when the guests began to leave, Basil himself insisted upon helping the staggering Emperor to his chamber, and at the threshold kissed his hand respectfully. Michael, guarded by two faithful servants, was soon sound asleep. Then Basil and the conspirators entered the room. They were eight in all. At this sudden irruption the chamberlain Ignatius cried out in horror and tried to resist them. The noise of the struggle awoke the Basileus, who stared at the scene, completely sobered. Thereupon John Chaldius, one of Basil's friends, drew his sword and cut off the Emperor's hands; another knocked down Basiliscianus, while the rest of the gang kept guard at the door to prevent the soldiers on duty from coming to their master's help. After Chaldius's blow the conspirators consulted together. "We have cut his hands off" said one of them, "but he is still alive; if he lives, what will become of us?" Then one of the murderers went back into the room where Michael, sitting up in bed and covered with blood, was groaning and cursing his assassins, Basil most of all. With a thrust of his sword the man ran him through the belly, and returned proudly to tell Basil that it was all over.

Constantine VII was not insensible to the horror of this tragic and cowardly murder. In his biography of his grandfather he merely says: "The chief members of the nobility and of the senate, with the help of several soldiers of the guard, put the Emperor to death in the Palace of St. Mamas; and, being in a drunken stupor, he passed painlessly from sleep to death." Michael III's death was, on the

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

contrary, atrocious and terrible. He died, if not by the hand, at least by order of him whom he had created Emperor; and, rudely sobered at the last moment, he was able in his cruel agony to realise all the perfidy of Basil, the twofold parricide, murderer of his lawful sovereign and of his adoptive father.

Theodora's dark forebodings had come to pass; the Macedonian, surmounting every obstacle that stood between himself and the throne, had become Emperor. To complete the revolution, the conspirators, hastily crossing the Golden Horn, took possession of the Sacred Palace, and the next morning the new master's first act was to install with great pomp in the Empress's apartments his wife Eudocia Ingerina, who had been Michael III's mistress up to the end. Unashamed, he appeared with her in public in the streets of the capital on Christmas, 867, in a magnificent chariot drawn by four white horses. A few years later she even bore him a son, her first legitimate child, and later four daughters. The Macedonian peasant's boorish nature was not, as we can see, over-squeamish.

Indeed, it had never been. Three women had played important parts in Basil's life. Danielis, the matron of Patras, was rich; by giving him money she had assured his future; accordingly, he was careful to remember her and to cultivate her lucrative friendship. Eudocia had been and continued to be the Emperor's mistress; but he complacently married her, and complacently he shut his eyes to all her lapses. For she helped him in his ambitious projects and was useful to him; and therefore it was that even after Michael's death, and in spite of her later irregulari-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

ties, he always put up with her, feeling that it would be compromising the dynasty not to indulge her to the fullest extent. And there was also Thecla, Michael's sister, who had had a passion for the handsome Basil in other days; to her alone he was severe. Learning after a time that she had taken another lover, a former friend of the Caesar Bardas, he had the man beaten with rods and the woman cruelly whipped. It was not, as one might at first imagine, an outburst of retrospective jealousy on the part of the aged Emperor; Basil was thoroughly practical, and confiscated Thecla's property at the same time.

Thus all his life he remained a rough, primitive human animal, with the same strong passions and with the same coarse and brutal instincts as when he began his career; and that sheds an interesting light on the psychology of this dynasty-founder. He was a clever and successful adventurer, and a great statesman to boot, who by his government laid the foundations of two centuries of glory and splendour for the Byzantine Empire. He was always selfish and base, without scruples or delicacy, without gratitude or honour.

IV

The adventures of Basil the Macedonian seem to have led us away from the most pious Empress Theodora; but the tragedy of the 23rd of September 867, brings us back to her again. On this day of sorrow she makes her last appearance in history. After Basil had taken possession of the Sacred Palace, the question arose of the murdered Emperor's funeral; and the emissaries of the Basileus, on arriving at the

BASIL THE MACEDONIAN

Palace of St. Mamas, witnessed a lamentable scene. They discovered the body of Michael III lying on the floor with the entrails hanging out, half wrapped in the blanket of one of the horses he had been so fond of. Around the corpse some women in black were weeping and praying. It was the old Empress Theodora and her daughters, who had hastened thither at the news of the tragedy, and were piously beseeching God to have mercy upon the poor wretch.

By the circumstances that brought her to power, and by the great effort she made to restore Orthodoxy, the Blessed Theodora resembles another Empress of Byzantium, the Basilissa Irene. But she was neither so imperious and domineering, nor so ambitious and criminal. A devout and tender soul, she loved the images, her husband, and her son, and perhaps, after Theophilus's death, her minister Theoctistus. And if she cherished any hatreds (against her brother Bardas in particular), it was not from regret for power lost, but rather from remembrance of her favourite, so treacherously slain. She descended the throne simply and without bitterness; in her long old age she witnessed the end of her race and the fall of her dynasty. If today she is celebrated in history, it is chiefly for having been the restorer of Orthodoxy; but she is worthy of being remembered for other reasons as well. The events in which she took part shed, like the adventures of Basil, a curious light upon ninth-century Byzantium, where we find intermingled — to appropriate the title of Maurice Barrès' excellent book — "blood, luxury, and death."

VIII

THE FOUR MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

ON the 29th of August, 886, Basil I died suddenly from the results of a peculiar hunting-accident. One day, while pursuing his favourite diversion in the neighbourhood of the capital, he had become separated from his companions while giving chase to a stag of great size; the animal on being brought to bay had turned quickly and charged the Emperor's horse, and, having accidentally caught his antlers in the sovereign's belt, lifted him bodily from the saddle. When the terrified horse rejoined the hunt riderless, there was a great uproar among the courtiers, which increased when they perceived in the distance the stag carrying along the Emperor in its mad career. They tried in vain to bring the animal to a standstill; but, whenever they seemed to be gaining a little on it, it would make a bold and successful dash for liberty. At last some of the guard managed to head the stag off, and one of them came up and cut the Emperor's belt with his sword. Basil fell lifeless to the ground, and was carried back to the Sacred Palace in a critical condition. He was nearly seventy-four years of age, and for some months past his health had been seriously impaired. In these circumstances his accident—

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

the stag had carried him along for about sixteen miles — was particularly grave. Internal complications set in, and a week later the founder of the Macedonian house died, leaving the throne to his eldest son, Leo.

I

Neither in appearance nor in character did Leo VI resemble his father; and the general gossip concerning his parentage — for everyone believed him to be the son of Michael III — is sufficient to explain this radical dissimilarity. The new Basileus was rather frail and of indifferent health; and this fact at once foreshadows the rival ambitions which were bound to spring up throughout his reign because of the uncertainty attaching to the succession. Furthermore, being of a sedentary disposition and disliking the constant journeys and fatigues of military life, Leo preferred to stay in the Palace, and took a great interest in those matters of ceremonial that formed the background of an Emperor's official life; and this explains the importance of favourites and the great number of court intrigues which mark his reign. He was a scholarly Prince, also. As a pupil of Photius, he had acquired from this eminent teacher a love of classical culture. He was well grounded in all branches of learning, and had a taste for authorship; we have from his pen verses, works of edification, theological essays, a treatise on tactics, and a collection of oracles. His contemporaries called him the "very wise" Emperor (*σοφώτατος*); later ages wove legends about him, and down to the very end of the Byzantine Empire he retained his popu-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

larity as a profound and universal scholar, equally learned in mathematics, astronomy, music, and, in short, everything.

He was also very religious; there exists a collection of homilies which he used to deliver from the pulpit on the principal feasts; he had a great respect for his confessor, whom he was wont to consult constantly, though sometimes he had arguments with him; and he took particular pleasure in the society of monks, whom he often visited unexpectedly and informally, dining and drinking with them, and discussing 'the quality of their wines. But a chief characteristic was an extreme prudishness, at least in utterance. In one of his Novels he inveighs against people who "instead of bathing in the pure waters of matrimony prefer to wallow in the mud of fornication." Nor was he less severe on those who married a second or a third time; "most animals," said he in one of his edicts, "when their mate is dead, retire into perpetual widowhood. Human beings, on the contrary, unconscious of the shameful nature of their weakness, are not satisfied with one marriage, but proceed immodestly to contract a second, and not content with that, go from the second to a third", flouting the ecclesiastical law and the canonical penalties attaching thereunto, regardless of civil law, and the disfavour in which it held such unions.

However, the reign of Leo VI, as has rightly been said, is epoch-making in Byzantine history. By his legislative work and by his reorganisation both of the provincial administration and of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, this monarch left an indelible mark on the Greek Empire of the East. And the reason is that, in

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

spite of the influence of favourites, he was a man of greater energy and initiative than he is given credit for being; and feeble and inconsistent as he often appears, capricious and headstrong though he may seem, he was, nevertheless, an astute sovereign, who pursued unswervingly the end that he had in view, with a versatile dexterity for discovering both the means and the opportunities of attaining it. At the same time, and, with whatever caution we receive the too-generally accepted account of the Emperor Leo VI, it is undeniable that this austere legislator, with such regard for the proprieties and such concern for ecclesiastical law, was fated by his successive marriages to give his contemporaries great offence and profoundly to disturb the Church. The reason was that Leo VI ascended the throne at the age of twenty, and that he was married to a woman he did not love.

II

Although for dynastic reasons Basil, in 869, had created Leo co-Emperor, and although he had had him brought up with the utmost care as heir apparent, he had never loved him; and by the side of a stern suspicious, irascible father the young man appears to have led a dreary existence. Basil had a strong preference for his eldest son, Constantine, the offspring, probably, of his first marriage, and regarding whose parentage he had no doubts; towards Leo, on the other hand, he displayed a manifest ill will, to the point of entertaining the most improbable accusations against him.

In growing older, Basil lost something of the solid

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

common sense that had long distinguished him. He allowed himself to be influenced by favourites, and chiefly by a certain abbot, Theodore Santabareus, a protégé of the Patriarch Photius, whom his contemporaries strongly suspected of practising magic and sorcery. The premature death of his favourite son Constantine had had the effect of weakening the Emperor's sound judgement; he was inconsolable, and imagined himself surrounded by intrigues and conspiracies to dethrone him. Thus, when Santabareus, who had been for a long time at odds with the Crown Prince, denounced Leo to the Basileus for plotting against his father's life, Basil allowed himself to be convinced with ease and on the flimsiest evidence. By his orders Leo was imprisoned in one of the rooms of the Palace and stripped of his red buskins, the insignia of his imperial rank; and the sovereign seems seriously to have considered blinding the young man. At all events, the courtiers who were suspected of having furthered the imaginary plot were tortured or exiled; and for three long months Leo himself was kept in confinement. His release was due to the energetic intervention of the Patriarch Photius, but chiefly to that of Basil's intimate friend, Stylianus Zaützes, commander of one of the guard-regiments, who ventured to speak to his master with fearless and honourable candour.

All the high officials and the entire Senate, disturbed by Basil's rapidly failing health, advised clemency. In this connexion, some of the chroniclers tell a rather touching story. In the great dining-hall of the Sacred Palace hung a parrot in its cage, and it was in the habit of crying: "Alas! alas! poor

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

Leo!" One day, on the occasion of a great reception, as the parrot was repeating his accustomed phrase, many of the guests, thinking sadly of the prisoner, were unable to conceal their sorrow. At last the Emperor noticed it, and questioned them. "How could we have the heart to eat" they answered, "when a poor bird seems to reproach us with our conduct? He is calling for his master, and can we, in the midst of pleasures, forget our innocent prince? Either he is guilty, in which case we stand ready to condemn him; or else he is innocent, and how, then, can a lying tongue prevail against him?" Whether or not this story is true, Basil gave way; upon the feast of Elijah the Prophet the prince was set free, reinstated in his honours and dignities, and permitted to take part once more in the imperial procession. But the old Basileus, though granting pardon, had by no means put aside his antipathy. When the people, as Leo passed by, cheered, and cried: "Glory be to God!" Basil remarked: "You are thanking God on my son's account, are you? Well, he will cause you much sorrow and trouble."

These stories shew that relations between the Emperor and his son were anything but affectionate; and it is probable that Leo was very much afraid of his violent, terrible father, who bent him mercilessly to his will. Early in life he had learned to be submissive. Just before his sixteenth birthday Basil decided to find him a wife. As was the custom, a dozen or so of the most beautiful girls in the Empire were assembled in one of the rooms of the Palace of Magnaura. While awaiting the arrival of the Basileus, the young girls were in a great state of

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

excitement, and amused themselves by trying to guess which would be chosen. One of them, an Athenian, who, according to the chronicler, "was acquainted with the art of predicting the future by omens, as practised in her own country", proposed in fun the following singular test. All the candidates were to sit down on the floor and put their shoes in front of them; and she who, at a given signal, could get up the soonest, put on her slippers, and make a deep curtsy, would infallibly become Empress. While they were engaged in this diversion, in came the Emperor. The first to get up was a girl named Theophano, a member of an illustrious patrician family of the capital, the Martinacii. As she was of good stock, very pretty, and devout, she pleased Basil and his wife Eudocia, thus fulfilling the omen. Leo was not even consulted in the matter. It happened that his affections were elsewhere engaged. Stylianus Zaützes, commander of the Lesser Hetairia, an intimate friend and compatriot of the Basileus, had a daughter, Zoë. Leo was deeply in love with her, and wanted to marry her. But this did not bother Basil in the least; he gave his commands, and out of fear Leo obeyed him. So with great ceremony, in the winter of 881-2, he married Theophano.

Such a marriage was certain to turn out unhappily, especially since Theophano, though her virtues were many, was so foolish as to be jealous and so stupid as to be inept. She fancied she had grounds for believing that her husband was still paying court to Zaützes's daughter, and rushed off at once to complain to the Emperor. With his usual brutality

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

Basil made a most violent scene; taking his son by the hair, he threw him on the ground, and with kicks and blows intimated to him that he had better be faithful to his wife. After which, to make an end of the matter, he treated Zoë as he had his son, marrying her in spite of herself to one Theodore Gutzuniates, and deluded himself that thus he had restored peace in the household. It may easily be imagined that Leo's original antipathy for Theophano was hardly diminished by this occurrence; and although, during the period of his disgrace, the young woman gave evidence of affectionate devotion for him to the point of wanting to share his captivity, domestic concord was never completely re-established. Leo may well have esteemed his wife; but he loved her no more than before.

So long as the terrible Basil lived, there was a semblance of concord between husband and wife. But when Leo became Emperor, and free from restraint, matters soon went from bad to worse. Moreover, Theophano was a saintly woman, wholly given up to good works, and whose chief concern was the love of God. "With morbid zeal" says her pious biographer, "the Augusta applied herself to the salvation of her soul, treating as dirt under her feet all the pleasures of worldly life. Day and night her soul mounted to God in the chanting of psalms and in constant prayer; and unceasingly she drew near to Him by her works of charity. In public she wore the flowers of the purple and was clad in all the splendour of majesty. In private she dressed secretly in rags. Preferring the ascetic life to all else, she despised sumptuous fare, and when delicate

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

dishes were set before her took bread and vegetables instead. All the money that she received, all the things so highly esteemed by worldly folk, she distributed to the poor; her magnificent robes she gave to the needy; she ministered to the necessities of widows and orphans; she enriched the monasteries, and loved the monks like brothers." At night she forsook her imperial bed, with its gorgeous gold-embroidered coverlets, to lie in a corner on a coarsely covered mat, and every hour she arose to pray. Such a woman was a saint; but she was neither an Empress nor the fit companion for a Prince twenty years of age.

The death of Eudocia, the only child of the marriage, in the winter of 892, was a further aggravation of the discord between them. After this sorrow Theophano became more melancholy than ever and more aloof from the world; furthermore, her ascetic excesses had made her seriously ill. "The Emperor" says her biographer, "could not hope to have another child by her, since her body, weakened and consumed by spiritual contemplation, was no longer capable of giving itself up to the delights of the flesh." Leo, as we may imagine, grew more and more tired of this woman who had been only a constant source of vexation. Furthermore, he had not forgotten the love of his youth; and he decided to take Zoë as his mistress.

The Empress soon learned of this; and as, by a curious contradiction of nature, this saintly woman was still jealous, the misunderstandings of the imperial household were on the point of culminating in an open breach.

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

There lived at that time in the monastery of Psamathia in Constantinople a holy man named Euthymius, whose recently-discovered biography is one of the most instructive documents on the reign of Leo VI that we possess. Held in great esteem by the Emperor, to whom he had rendered important services in Basil's lifetime, he was in the habit of speaking to him with unvarnished frankness, and was not sparing of admonitions. To him the Empress turned in her distress. She explained that since the death of her beloved daughter there was no longer any reason for her to live in the Palace; that she suffered too cruelly from the situation in which she was placed; that she asked only for permission to retire to the convent belonging to the Church of Blachernae, where she had long been accustomed to perform her devotions; and that if this were granted she would consent to everything, even to a divorce. Euthymius comforted her, and pointed out the grave responsibility she would be assuming if she were to leave a husband already too inclined to go astray; after which he went to see the Emperor. He found him delighted at his wife's proposal, and radiant at the thought of being able before long to wed his mistress. Euthymius reprimanded him severely; and when the Basileus had aired all the grievances that he had stored up for the past ten years against Theophano, and had ended by saying: "After all, I am not turning her out, and I shall have both civil and ecclesiastical law on my side if I take another wife", the indignant saint said he would never willingly see him again if he should persist in his wicked purpose.

In spite of this threat — a particularly serious one

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

to so devout a man as Leo —, the Emperor would listen to nothing. To begin with, he loved Zoë passionately. But a further reason for persisting was his great desire to have a son to carry on the Macedonian dynasty. He knew that his own health was poor; his brother Alexander was ruining himself in wild debauchery; the interests of the dynasty and the peace of the Empire alike bade him provide the throne as soon as possible with a legitimate heir. For a long time this had been his chief anxiety; to obtain this ardently-desired child he had made pilgrimages to the most famous shrines; in order to discover whether his prayer would be granted he had been diligent in consulting the stars; and since they promised him a son, he did not hesitate to keep his mistress "in the conviction" as a chronicler says, that he was obeying the orders of God Himself, and was yielding to inevitable fate."

It should be noted, by the bye, that in the eyes of contemporaries, and even of Theophano's panegyrists, this reason of State seems to have been sufficient to explain and excuse Leo's adultery. The Empress at last bowed to necessity. Prompted by Euthymius, who represented to her the eminent merit of resignation, she consented to avoid the open scandal of a separation, and left the field to her rival, seeking consolation in God. She did not suffer long. Shortly after the events related, on the 10th of November, 893, Theophano died. She was not yet thirty years of age. Leo, as was right and proper, gave his wife a splendid funeral. She was buried in the imperial Church of the Holy Apostles, where her little daughter Eudocia already lay; the Basileus de-

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

terminated to build a church in honour of her, and to dedicate it under her name. Soon the many miracles and extraordinary cures effected at her tomb apprised all Byzantium of the virtues of its deceased Empress; the Church numbered the melancholy Princess with the saints; and for many years the Emperor was obliged by the ceremonial to go once a year in person and offer incense and prayers in her memory.

III

Leo was free.

He had once said to Euthymius: "I shall never forget Zoë, and there will come a day when I shall have compassion on her and on myself." That day had come. But, before he could marry his mistress, he had to reckon with one more obstacle, her husband. Gutzuniates had the good taste to die soon after Theophano — so soon, in fact, that certain evilly-disposed persons imagined that these two opportune deaths were not, perhaps, altogether fortuitous. But Leo was Emperor; Zoë was the Prime Minister's daughter; and no one cared to look closely into the matter.

Everything thus concurred to bring about the desired marriage. The Basileus adored his mistress more than ever, and she had been the means of saving his life a few months earlier, by discovering a plot against him. Zoë's father, Stylianus Zaützes, who had been in charge of the government from the beginning of the reign, and whom the Basileus had invested with the newly created, and in a sense symbolic, title of *Βασιλεοπάτωρ*, or Father of the Emperor, advocated the marriage with all his energy,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

thinking thereby to restore his declining influence; and to help matters he had installed the young widow in his own apartments at the Palace. Euthymius, who had never been on good terms with the minister, was alone in opposition. He told the Emperor that his contemplated act was impious and illegal. But Leo only laughed at his reproofs. "See here, Father" he said to the holy man, "listen to me and don't be silly. I've lost my wife, as you know, and like everyone else I've got to think about marrying again. Now Zoë is in the same predicament; she is free. Why are you trying to prevent a thing that the law commands and that Scripture advises?" Euthymius lost his temper and retorted: "No one is trying to prevent you from marrying again; but you must not marry Zoë, whom people accuse of so much evil. If you do, everyone will believe the ugly rumours that are being circulated about her." And once more he declared that, if Zoë became Empress, he would never see the Emperor again.

A lover does not argue; between his confessor and his mistress he scarcely hesitated. He invited Euthymius to retire to a monastery, and married Zoë. But his happiness was of short duration. In less than two years, towards the end of 896, the young Empress died of a mysterious illness, a very few months after her father, Stylianus Zaützes. Immediately the courtiers, in spite of Leo's grief, foresaw precisely what would happen; and Zoë's relatives, whose fortunes she had zealously promoted during her lifetime, said openly: "The Emperor will take another wife and send us all away."

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

IV

It must be admitted that Leo had very bad luck. Of his connexion with Zoë one daughter only had been born, the Princess Anna, and dynastic reasons therefore required that the Emperor should marry a third time. But this was a serious step for the Prince to take. The canons of the Church formally censured such a union; public opinion felt it to be unworthy of a Basileus; and Leo himself in one of his Novels had recently criticised with great severity men who could be so incontinent. Nor was that all. The Emperor had loved Zoë passionately, and profoundly mourned her loss. He spoke to Euthymius with great feeling of "my poor wife", as he said, "whom you never liked." In this state of mind he soon came again under his confessor's influence; and although he had no intention whatever, as he said very clearly, of "letting him be another Stylianus, ordering and governing everything", he treated the monk with great deference, for he knew and rather dreaded his rough, uncompromising frankness. For all these reasons the Basileus hesitated some time before taking another wife. Since the imperial etiquette absolutely demanded that there should be a woman in the Sacred Palace to preside over ceremonies in which the ladies of the court took part, he had the young Princess Anna proclaimed Augusta, which shews how distasteful a new marriage was to him. But Anna was betrothed to a Carolingian prince, young Louis of Provence, and was on the point of leaving Constantinople for her new country. To replace her an Empress was imperatively re-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

quired. Besides, Leo was young; he was thirty-two or -three years of age; time had assuaged his grief, and with it his scruples. In 899 he took the step. He married a very pretty girl of Asiatic origin, Eudocia Baiane, by name; but the Emperor had certainly no luck at all in his schemes, for the new Basilissa died a year later in giving birth to a son, who unfortunately died also.

All was to do again, seeing that the longed-for heir was still wanting. The question had now reached an extraordinarily serious stage. The Emperor's third marriage, though it was justified by plausible enough reasons, and though the Church, while holding it to be "an unclean act", had not formally censured it, had nevertheless scandalised many pious souls. This was clearly shewn when, after Eudocia's death, the Abbot of St. Lazarus had refused point-blank to allow her to be buried in his monastery, so that the poor woman's body had to be carried back to the Palace. The same disapproval is evident from the attitude of Euthymius, when he advised Leo to have her buried quietly; saying that it would not be proper to make a display of mourning in the midst of the splendour and joy of the great feast of the Anastasis (Eudocia had died on Easter-day); and that these official processions, these tears and funeral laments, all ended in a common tomb, in a common miserable end, in a common extinction. To men who thought thus, a fourth marriage would be simply an abomination. The Church absolutely forbade it in the most formal terms; the civil law did not even make provision for such an utterly unheard-of measure of perversity.

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

In Byzantine eyes, such a union was worse than adultery. But what of it? Leo needed a son.

Conspiracies against the Emperor increased. In the Palace itself the troublesome, untrustworthy Alexander constantly intrigued against his imperial associate, whom he had always cordially detested, considering himself, rather than his brother, the legitimate descendant of Basil; and the Emperor very nearly fell victim to these machinations. The attempt, planned to take place in the Church of St. Mocius, had well-nigh succeeded, and it was pure chance that the Emperor had not been beaten to death that day by an assassin's club. All these things worried Leo, who fully realised the encouragement afforded to such conspiracies by the want of an heir apparent. But, not daring to marry immediately, he began by taking a mistress. She was a certain Zoë Carbonupsina, Zoë "Black-eyes," who seems to have belonged to one of the great families of the Byzantine aristocracy, and who was related to the famous chronicler Theophanes. She was intelligent, ambitious, energetic, and astute; she soon came to exercise great influence over her lover, and used it to advance her relatives at court, so as to form a party in her favour; and before long she dreamed of marriage.

From the very beginning of the connexion Leo seems to have intended to marry her. It was probably with this end in view that in 901 he raised to the Patriarchate a relative of Photius, the *mystikos*, or private secretary, Nicholas. Adoptive brother of the Emperor (Basil I had stood sponsor to him), he had been brought up with him and had always been

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

his friend; the Basileus thought, therefore, that he could count upon his support to surmount the Church's opposition to fourth marriages, and he soon sounded him on the subject. But Nicholas was one of those prelates who were never wanting in Byzantium, "both courtier and monk, versed in sacred lore and in intrigue, knowing when to close their eyes and when to give an example of lofty courage."¹ He had taken orders somewhat against his will, and cherished worldly ambitions in his haughty, imperious soul. Feeling that he had it in him to be a statesman, he concerned himself rather with politics than with church government; his desire was to rule, and in order to realise his dream considered it unnecessary to baulk at vain scruples of gratitude or loyalty. He was several times accused, and not without likelihood, of having conspired against his lawful sovereign. He regarded his high ecclesiastical dignity chiefly as the means to an end — the stepping-stone, as it were, to future greatness. In his pride of place, he imagined that he could treat the imperial authority with contempt, and did not hesitate to dispute the Emperor's commands. He wrote somewhere as follows: "If, under the inspiration of the Devil, the Emperor were to order something contrary to the law of God, one should not obey him; an impious order emanating from an impious person must be deemed devoid of all authority. A servant of God will never obey such criminal commands; rather would he lose his life than serve such a master." He was no less haughty towards the Pope, and was not afraid to lecture him, and to

¹ A. N. Rambaud, *L'Empire grec au X^e siècle*, p. 10.

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

criticise his decisions and his unwelcome intervention in the affairs of the Eastern Church; and feeling that in his resistance he was upheld by all his clergy he utterly refused, in spite of the Basileus's orders, to communicate with the Roman legates, thus defying Pope and Emperor at the same time.

Although very unyielding and insolent when circumstances were favourable, under stress of necessity he could be pliant and accommodating; for in spite of his superior intellect his soul was base. Violent and passionate, compact of old rancours and sturdy hates, he neither forgot an outrage nor forgave an enemy, and when the day of reckoning arrived pursued his adversaries with the most pitiless cruelty. His harshness then was inexorable towards those to whom he had formerly been most servile; unscrupulous and merciless, he beat down his enemies to the ground, but was ever ready, if luck should turn and his own interests demand it, to become their most humble, obedient servant once more.

Such a man would be sure to disappoint the hopes that Leo had in him. When the Emperor broached his matrimonial intentions to Nicholas, the Patriarch seems to have refused unconditionally to have any hand in violating the canons of the Church. At all events, it is clear that relations between the prelate and the Basileus became tense; the court favourites, led by Samonas, openly incited the sovereign against the Patriarch; Leo was irritated to such a degree that he thought of holding Nicholas responsible for the attempted assassination in the Church of St. Mocius, and it needed the intervention of Euthymius to prevent a prosecution. But in

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

spite of his suspicions and his wrath, the Emperor was at a loss for means to shake the Patriarch's opposition, knowing him to be upheld by the well-nigh unanimous voice of his clergy, when, very fortunately for Leo, an unexpected circumstance gave him a weapon against the prelate.

Seeing that he was in disfavour at court, Nicholas had not hesitated to conspire with Andronicus Ducas, who in 904 had revolted against the Emperor. Now, it so happened that, when the rebel had been obliged to take refuge among the Arabs, some of his friends, to procure their own pardon, had delivered up his papers to Leo; among them was an autograph letter from the Patriarch affording incontestable proof of his treason. The Basileus had now the means of overcoming Nicholas's haughty opposition; and, in fact, when a palace servant indiscreetly acquainted him with what had happened, he realised that there was but one way in which he could save his place and his head — namely, by ceasing all resistance, and by appeasing the sovereign, if possible, by various concessions. And thenceforth, by a sudden change of attitude, he was ready to do all that was required of him.

This was in 905. Zoë Carbonupsina was about to become a mother, and the Emperor was enraptured at the expectation of his approaching paternity. The haughty Patriarch now came every day to the Palace. He dined with the Basileus and his mistress, assured Leo that the child would be a boy, and to this end ordered solemn prayers to be said daily for a week in St. Sophia; then with his own priestly hands he gravely blessed the favourite's womb, and

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

declared that the future prince would be the glory of the Church. Events justified the prelate's promises and fulfilled the Emperor's prayers. At the end of 905 the child was born, and it was a boy. The legitimation of the long-desired heir was thenceforth the sovereign's only thought. Nicholas did his best to help; but the other bishops resisted, saying that "the birth of a child could not render a prohibited union licit", and refused in consequence to perform the baptism, particularly with the imperial honours with which Leo wished to celebrate it. At last a compromise was hit upon. Since, after all, as the Patriarch explained later, "paternal affection is a human sentiment", the clergy promised to baptize the infant if Leo would promise to separate from the mother. On these conditions the baptism was performed, on the 6th of January, 906, in St. Sophia, by the Patriarch himself. Alexander, brother of the Basileus, and Euthymius, were the godfathers of the young Constantine Porphyrogenitus. The Emperor's desire was fulfilled.

But Leo stuck to Zoë. Three days after the baptism, in spite of his promises and vows, he brought his mistress back again to the Palace; in fact, he was determined to marry her. Nicholas did not feel able to condescend quite to the point of solemnising this scandalous marriage himself; but he found an accommodating priest to do it, who was immediately afterwards deposed; and Leo with his own hands crowned the new Empress. The capital, naturally, was in a great flutter; and the Church, thus openly set at naught, answered the tetragamous Emperor by formally forbidding him access to the holy places.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Thereupon, in order to obtain the dispensation necessary to legitimate his marriage, Leo had an ingenious idea which reflects great credit upon the astuteness and tenacity of his diplomacy. From the intransigence of the Byzantine clergy he appealed to the Universal Church, and decided to consult upon the question of fourth marriages the Roman pontiff, and the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem; and the ambitious Nicholas, although highly discontented by these foreign interventions, which diminished the prestige of his sole authority, was obliged to consent. He expected, indeed, that the consultation would result unfavourably to the Emperor's hopes. But in any event, while awaiting the result of his embassies, Leo kept Zoë in the Palace, refusing to be separated from her even for a single day; he had her paid all the honours due to an Empress, and the only concession he made to the Church was to submit docilely to the interdict against him.

The Patriarch Nicholas, in the account which he later gave of these events, paints, as is natural, his own attitude in the brightest colours. He maintains that he spared his sovereign, directly the marriage had been performed, neither counsel nor remonstrance; that he begged him to send Zoë away for a time until the Patriarchs had rendered a decision; and that Leo met all these fair words with a refusal. As a matter of fact, the Patriarch seems to have displayed much less energy in opposing the Prince; in his great desire for pardon he seems, on the contrary, to have tried his best to please the Basileus by his eagerness to arrange matters. In sources less

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

prejudiced than Nicholas's letter the prelate is to be seen at one time searching the Fathers for texts to justify fourth marriages, at another encouraging Leo, in spite of the interdict and without waiting for the decisions of the Patriarchs, to enter the churches, saying loftily that he would receive him in person. Was it that Nicholas hoped, by inciting the Emperor to a false move, to arouse public opinion still further against him? Or did he rather seek, by his willingness to serve the Basileus, to make him forget the unfortunate document that proved his disloyalty? In the case of such a man as he either alternative is possible. The Emperor, however, did not fall in with the prelate's suggestions. "I do not wish to avail myself of any permission that you may give" said he, "until the arrival of the bishops from Rome."

Meanwhile good news arrived from the West. The imperial envoys informed the Basileus that the Pope in no way disapproved of fourth marriages, and that legates bearing the desired dispensation were on the point of starting for Constantinople. This provoked a sudden change in the Patriarch's attitude. So long as the marriage question was in suspense, making the Emperor dependent, to a certain extent, upon the prelate, Nicholas might have legitimately believed that Leo, having need of him, would be obliged to treat him with consideration; and that in these circumstances, by pleading his good offices, it would be an easy matter to obtain pardon for his crime of high treason. Affairs had now taken another turn. Since he was sure of the approval of the Universal Church, Leo had no longer any reason to consider the head of the Byzantine Church, and he already

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

announced to his friends that, when the synod had assembled, his first act would be to rid himself of a Patriarch hostile and a traitor to his sovereign. Nicholas saw that he had but one chance left, namely, to throw himself heart and soul into the opposition. He understood the long-standing hostility which the Eastern clergy entertained to Rome, and felt certain of a following if he were to pose as the defender of Byzantine independence against papal interference. If by these tactics he were successful in checkmating both Pope and Emperor, what a triumph for his ambition it would be! If he were to fall in the struggle, his fall would at least be noble, and a martyr's halo would envelope the inflexible champion of the violated canons. Thus Nicholas, whose pride was very really wounded at seeing Rome meddle in the affairs of his patriarchate, resumed the most unyielding and haughty attitude.

At the same time Leo, anticipating the Roman decisions, judged it unnecessary to continue any longer in the humiliating position of a man under an interdict, which in the long run had shewed signs of prejudicing his imperial prestige. On Christmas-day, 906, followed by the Senate and the entire court, he presented himself at St. Sophia, thinking that the Patriarch would not deny him the admission which during the past months he had repeatedly offered. But at the threshold of the imperial doorway he found the prelate, who absolutely forbade entrance to the church, though holding out the hope that at the coming feast of the Epiphany he would consent to receive him. Leo thought it best not to press the point, and accepted the humiliation inflicted on

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

him; and the prelate imagined that he could carry his insolence still further. On the 6th of January, 907, he once more stopped the Emperor at the gates of the basilica. "Without the unanimous consent of the metropolitans" said he, "I cannot allow you to enter; and if you force your way in, we will leave." This time the Patriarch had gone too far. "It seems to me, my Lord Patriarch," exclaimed the Emperor, "that you are making a mock of Our Majesty. Are you hoping that the rebel Ducas will return from Syria? Is it from confidence in him that you thus insult us?" At this unexpected outburst the astounded Patriarch no longer knew what attitude to take; standing at the threshold of the imperial doorway he answered nothing, and seemed unable to go either forward or back. Leo, on the other hand, kept all his presence of mind and his dignity. As the courtiers were urging him to enter the basilica, he silenced them with a gesture, and knowing that by his behaviour he was putting Nicholas completely in the wrong, quietly returned to the Imperial Palace.

But at the official dinner that evening, towards the end of the meal, the Emperor, in the presence of the bishops and the high officials, made a violent attack upon the prelate. He bade him remember his promises, his flatteries, his past indulgence, and he openly called him a liar and a perjurer. Then, inviting the metropolitans to his private apartments, he reminded them with tears of his successive matrimonial misfortunes, and sending for his son took him in his arms and asked them all to bless him and pray for him. This touching scene moved many of the bishops who had supported Nicholas's unyielding policy only out

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

of fear. The Roman legates had arrived bearing the dispensation; in the West, where fourth marriages were not forbidden, the imperial request had seemed perfectly natural. It was in vain that Nicholas refused to enter into public relations with the foreigners, hoping thus to fan the old grudges of the Byzantines against the Latins, "who seemed" so he said, "never to come our way except to declare war." Part of the Greek episcopate was won over by bribes to abandon its chief; some of the most recalcitrant were sent into exile; finally, to undermine the Patriarch's influence with the clergy, it was decided to take active measures against him.

On the 1st of February, at the end of a great court dinner, the Emperor began a veritable indictment of the prelate, and ended by formally denouncing his intrigues with Ducas, and his treason; after which he had Nicholas arrested, and ordered him sent under strong guard to an Asiatic monastery. A few days later the synod granted Leo the dispensations necessary for his marriage, and removed the ecclesiastical penalties. And as the Patriarch Nicholas still persisted in opposition, the Emperor asked him to resign. Fearing the prosecution with which he was threatened for his crime of high treason, Nicholas finally capitulated; and, although later he complained bitterly of the libellous reports circulated about him, and the odious partiality displayed by the legates in welcoming all the lies told of him, the indisputable fact that he preferred to resign voluntarily rather than let himself be deposed is ample proof that his conscience was not perfectly clear. In his place the metropolitans raised

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

the pious and austere Euthymius to the patriarchal throne, and he, in spite of his repugnance, yielded at last to the unanimous request of the bishops, the Roman legates, and the Emperor.

By this arrangement Leo imagined that the question of his fourth marriage had been ended in accordance with his desires; in reality he had started a schism in the Eastern Church. Clergy and people took sides, as between Euthymius and Nicholas. It became necessary to exile the most eminent of the metropolitans, who insisted on taking the part of the deposed Patriarch, to order prosecutions, and to imprison opponents; and these severities increased the general criticism of Leo, of Zoë, and even of the new Patriarch. Euthymius had, doubtless, agreed only to a compromise (*οἰκονομία*); in removing the ecclesiastical censures he had in no way recognised the validity in law of fourth marriages, and had firmly upheld the deposition of the priest who had performed the ceremony. Nevertheless, the pamphlets spared him no more than his master, and Leo indeed looked to him to remove the last stains of illegality that still tarnished his marriage. He asked that Zoë should be mentioned officially as Augusta in the prayers in St. Sophia. But upon this point, notwithstanding the Empress's threats and entreaties, notwithstanding the anger of the Basileus, who thought for a while of deposing Euthymius, the prelate was inflexible. He consented, nevertheless, to crown the young Constantine Porphyrogenitus solemnly as Emperor of the Romans in St. Sophia on the 9th of June, 911. Thus, by his astuteness and tenacity, Leo VI, in spite of all, had gained his ends.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

V

The affair of the tetragamy, however, was destined to trouble the Byzantine world for many years. When Leo VI died, in the month of May, 912, the whole question, indeed, was reopened. During seven years the struggle was carried on between two ambitious rivals: Zoë, ardently defending her imperial rank, her marriage, and her son; and the Patriarch Nicholas, no less ardent for revenge, and, through the victory of his opinions, for the realisation of his constant lust for power. It is true that, in conformity with the promises that the Senate had made to the dying Basileus, the young Constantine VII was proclaimed Emperor. But he had as colleague and tutor his uncle Alexander, and the latter's first act was to drive Zoë brutally from the Palace, and to reinstate Nicholas upon the patriarchal throne. The prelate returned from exile thirsting for vengeance. Haughtier and more insolent than ever in the moment of his triumph, he satisfied all his rancour to the point of satiety, and in the certainty of pleasing the Basileus Alexander, whose policy he thus subserved, spared nothing and nobody. The venerable Euthymius was the first to suffer. Having been cited to appear before an assembly held in the Palace of Magnaura, not only was he deposed and anathematised, but Nicholas so far forgot himself as to insult him basely; and the Patriarch's servants, falling upon the unfortunate man, tore his sacerdotal vestments, knocked him down, pulled out his beard, broke his teeth, and finally kicked and beat him so hard with their feet and fists that he lay unconscious on the spot, and with the greatest difficulty escaped death.

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

But this was not sufficient to appease Nicholas. He was determined to be revenged upon all who had been concerned in his disgrace and exile, upon Zoë, upon the Roman Pontiff, even upon the deceased Emperor. In a long memorial to Pope Anastasius he gave his own account of the affair of the fourth marriage, treating the conduct of the Basileus with outrageous severity, insultingly pitying Sergius III for his weakness in being duped by his legates, lecturing the Latins, and, above all, imperiously demanding reparation for the scandals that had been committed. He refused to regard the Basileus's fourth marriage as other than an act of debauchery (*πορνεία*), a filthy union worthy of an animal, and a disgrace to human nature; and if he should agree to pardon the dead, he demanded in return a rigorous condemnation of the guilty who were still alive; that is to say, Zoë and her son. The Emperor Alexander made similar representations at Rome. He hated his brother's son, whose existence kept him from supreme power, and passionately desired to have him proclaimed a bastard. He is said even to have considered making him an eunuch, in order to be rid of him, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he was restrained from his cruel purpose. Fortunately for the young Constantine, Alexander died in June, 913; but before his death he took care to nominate Nicholas President of the Council of Regency. He knew that he could count on the prelate to continue his policy and gratify his hatred.

While Alexander was dying, the ever-energetic Zoë had attempted a bold stroke; she had come to the Sacred Palace, saying that she wished to see her son

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and talk with the dying man, for she thought that thus she could regain her power. Nicholas had had her brutally driven away. Then, in order to free himself for ever of this possible rival, the all-powerful Regent, supreme master of the State, had issued an edict forbidding Zoë access to the imperial residence, and had withdrawn from her the title of Basilissa; a little later he obliged her even to enter a convent, thinking that henceforth she would be dead to the world. But Zoë was an adversary worthy of the Patriarch; in the convent to which she had been forced to retire she was but awaiting an opportunity to crush her rival. It soon came. The severity with which the Regents had put down the rebellion of Constantine Ducas had excited violent discontent; and in the Palace the young Emperor was crying for his mother. They were obliged to bring her back to him. This was in October, 913.

Having thus returned to the Palace once more, she improved the occasion by putting her own followers into important posts; she dismissed the favourites of the late Emperor Alexander, appointed by him to the Council of Regency, and then boldly attacked the Patriarch. Being an enterprising woman, she decided quite simply to have him assassinated; but Nicholas managed to escape the murderers and took refuge in St. Sophia, and for three weeks dared not leave that inviolable sanctuary. Zoë had won. She was already thinking of announcing the deposition of the Patriarch, and offered the position to Euthymius, who refused it. Nicholas, however, was still powerful, and negotiations were begun. The Patriarch promised to devote himself henceforth

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

exclusively to ecclesiastical affairs, to withdraw from the government of the State, and not to come to the Palace without being summoned. He agreed to include Zoë's name in the official prayers with that of the Basileus, her son, and solemnly to proclaim her Augusta. At this price he obtained full pardon for the past, and maintenance in his ecclesiastical dignity. In this struggle for the crown between Zoë and Nicholas, the churchman seemed definitely defeated (February, 914).

Nevertheless, it was he who won in the end, and who finally settled as he wished the long quarrel resulting from the fourth marriage of Leo VI. For Zoë, on becoming Regent, proved incapable of resisting the intrigues with which she was surrounded. The Empress had for a long time had a favourite, the Parakoimomenos Constantine, for whom even during Leo VI's lifetime she had been suspected of more than mere friendship. This person, who had shared the Empress's disgrace, had naturally returned with her to power, and he exercised complete influence over her. The anxiety of the young Emperor was at last aroused by his intimates, who told him that the favourite was plotting his downfall, and scheming to put his own son-in-law, the Strategus Leo Phocas, on the throne. A conspiracy was hatched. The navy was asked to lend its support against the Parakoimomenos and his relative, and the High Admiral Romanus Lecapenus received, and accepted, written orders from the Basileus to arrest the favourite. It was a direct blow at the Empress. She ran in fury to the terrace of the Bucoleon and asked her son and his friends what this

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

rebellion meant. She was told that her reign was ended and that the power had passed into other hands; on the next day an attempt was made to turn her out of the Palace. Thereupon she burst into tears, threw herself into her son's arms, claiming her rights as his mother, and begged him to keep her with him. Constantine allowed himself to be persuaded. "Let my mother remain with me" said he. But though she stayed on in the Palace, she had lost the supreme power. This was in 918.

In the crisis one man alone seemed capable of exercising authority. This was the Patriarch Nicholas, who in his disgrace had lost neither energy nor ambition. At the time of the revolution, when her favourite had been overthrown, Zoë herself had turned to him as her sole support; and it was he whom the Basileus appointed Prime Minister. He was still in possession of that post when, in March, 919, Romanus Lecapenus rose in his turn and took possession of the Palace and of the person of the sovereign, while awaiting the hour when he should have himself associated in the Empire — the first of that series of usurpers who several times during the tenth century governed the Byzantine monarchy in the name of the lawful Basileis.

It was concerning Romanus Lecapenus that the two adversaries, whose struggles had occupied nearly twenty years of the history of the Sacred Palace, measured their swords together for the last time. Zoë, who was still beautiful, is said to have conceived the idea of returning to power by fascinating the usurper and persuading him to marry her; it is certain, at all events, that after her party had been

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

definitely crushed in the rebellion of Leo Phocas she tried to have Lecapenus poisoned. She failed, and was exiled from court, this time for ever; and in the convent of St. Euphemia of the Petriion ended her tumultuous, dramatic life. Meanwhile Nicholas was having his triumph.

In June, 920, as much to please Romanus and to satisfy his own desire for revenge as to end the schism started by the tetragamy, the Patriarch promulgated the famous decree known as the *Tomus Unionis*. In a solemn service the Greek Church, in the presence of the Basileis Romanus and Constantine, celebrated the peace which had been re-established between the partisans of Nicholas and of Euthymius. The reconciliation was made at the expense of the Emperor Leo VI. In exceptional instances, to be sure, the Church agreed to condone and even to legitimate an Emperor's fourth marriage, should the case arise; but she shewed herself all the more inflexible in maintaining the canonical principles, and in severe condemnation of such unions. "We declare unanimously that a fourth marriage is absolutely forbidden" the prelates decreed. "Whosoever shall dare to enter into such a contract shall be excluded from every religious office for so long as he shall persist in his concubinage. The Fathers before us have judged likewise, and we, defining their thought, proclaim that such an act is contrary to the spirit of Christianity." With equal severity the prelates condemned third marriages. "This abuse" they said, "must be cleaned away, as one cleans away filth, lest, if it be swept into a corner, it spread again through the whole house." And, commenting on

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

these words, the Patriarch Nicholas wrote triumphantly to the Pope that, though out of respect for the imperial majesty they had shewn leniency, fourth marriages were contrary to the morals and discipline of the Church.

The young Emperor Constantine VII was obliged to be present at the reading of this decree condemning marriages such as that from which he was issued; and every year he was obliged to celebrate solemnly this Feast of Union, which recalled to his mind so many painful memories. It was a severe humiliation for the imperial authority; for the Church it was a victory of which she was justly proud; for the Patriarch Nicholas it was an unparalleled triumph, after so many struggles, disgraces, and unexpected restorations. Nevertheless, in spite of appearances, if one considers the root of the matter, it will be seen that Leo VI by his obstinate desire to have a son, by the successive marriages that he contracted for this purpose, by the astute tenacity that he displayed on the question of fourth marriages, rendered a signal service to the Empire and to the dynasty. It was only the existence of a lawful heir, around whom all loyal persons gathered, that kept Byzantium after the death of the Basileus from being plunged into the chaos of revolution. It was the life of this child, the representative of the Macedonian house, that caused the ambitious schemes of Constantine Ducas and Leo Phocas to fail, and that prevented Romanus Lecapenus from definitely establishing his heirs in the imperial power. If the imperial house of Macedonia, instead of spending a few brief years on the throne, was able to govern Byzantium for nearly

MARRIAGES OF LEO THE WISE

two centuries, and give it prodigious glory and prosperity, it is due essentially to the foresight of Leo VI, and to the clever diplomacy and steadfast courage with which this monarch, in spite of every difficulty, in spite of the opposition of the Church, pursued and achieved his end.

IX
THEOPHANO

IN the series of Byzantine Empresses Theophano is almost as celebrated as Theodora. Since M. Gustave Schlumberger in a charming work set himself to evoke her picturesque, fascinating personality, and tell the story of her romantic life, this forgotten Princess has suddenly resumed her place in history and in fame. Writers of renown, like Maupassant, graceful writers like the Vicomte de Vogüé, have been carried away by the charm of this beautiful creature, "who disturbed the world as much as Helen, and even more";¹ such novelists, indeed, as Hugues le Roux have described "this young woman of supernatural loveliness, containing in the delicate perfection of her harmony the power that troubles the world." We too, therefore, must find room in our portrait gallery for "this great sinner", as M. Schlumberger calls her, "whose charms had so fatal an influence, and who was destined to be loved by three successive Emperors." It must be admitted at once that many points in connexion with this mysterious, enigmatic Empress are still obscure; and from the outset we must resign ourselves to a large measure of ignorance. When the sources are silent, imagination, however ingenious,

¹ E. M. de Vogüé, *Regards historiques et littéraires*, p. 189.

THEOPHANO

has, I think, no right to supplement them; in taking such liberties with the text we run the risk of writing fiction rather than history. Now, Byzantium is in no sense what M. de Vogüé calls it — “a fairyland, a country virgin and unknowable” —; it is a very real country, that one can and should endeavour to understand in a scientific spirit. Studied thus, Theophano may appear to some less picturesque than she is usually portrayed; but I hope that she will at least be more convincing.

I

Whence came this famous Empress, who, towards the end of the year 956, married the only son of the Basileus Constantine VII, Romanus, the young heir apparent? Little is known. The court chroniclers, in their concern for the fair name of the dynasty, assert that she sprang of a very old and very noble family, and that the Emperor and his wife were overcome with joy at finding so well-born a bride for their son. But if the historians less favourable to the Macedonian house are to be believed, the parentage of the future Basilissa was far more modest. Her father, Craterus, of Laconian origin, was an obscure plebeian who kept a public-house in one of the slums of the capital. She herself, before her marriage, was called Anastasia, or more familiarly, Anastaso; it was only on drawing near to the throne that she received the more high-sounding name of Theophano, “in order to indicate”, say her panegyrists, “that she was manifested and chosen by God.”

In one respect at least she was worthy of her name: her beauty was radiant, superhuman, divine. “By

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

her beauty and her elegance" says a contemporary, "she surpassed all the women of her time." "Her beauty" says another chronicler, "was beyond compare, a miracle of nature." It was doubtless by means of it that she fascinated Romanus. But where did he meet her? how did he win her? We do not know. Did she owe her extraordinary good fortune to one of those beauty-shows that were commonly held in Byzantium when a Prince was to be provided with a wife, and in which the fairest girls of the monarchy were inspected by the Emperor and his relatives? I think it not unlikely. Or had there been some love-affair between the beautiful plebeian and the young heir to the throne, that ended in marriage? The adventures of Theodora prove that such things were possible, and Romanus's character as we know it does not exclude the possibility.

He was a big, handsome fellow, broad-shouldered, "straight as a cypress." He had beautiful eyes, a clear complexion, and an amiable countenance; his speech was soft and persuasive. He was made to please, and he loved amusement. Being a great hunter and fond of every kind of sport, he was always doing something; his vigorous constitution appreciated the pleasures of the table, and other pleasures as well. He was unfortunate in his companions and ill-advised by them, thought only of larks and adventures, and rewarded ill the great pains his father had taken with his education. The old Emperor Constantine VII, who was so ceremonious and so pious, had tried his best to impart his qualities to his son. "He had taught him" says the chronicler, "how a Basileus should speak, walk, stand, smile,

THEOPHANO

dress, sit down"; and after these lessons he would say gravely to the young man: "If you follow these precepts, you will reign many years over the Roman Empire." For the political and diplomatic instruction of his heir, Constantine VII, had, furthermore, composed very learned treatises — and most valuable they are to us — on the *Themes* and on the *Administration of the Empire*. But Romanus was eighteen years old and not at all anxious to become a statesman. In any case, as his father adored him, there were certainly no great difficulties made about his marriage with Theophano, whatever her origin. Soon after the marriage, in 958, the young wife bore her husband a son, the future Basil II, and thereby strengthened her position at court and increased her influence in the Palace. When, in the month of October, 959, Constantine VII died, Theophano of course ascended the throne with Romanus II. At that time she was eighteen years of age, and the young Emperor twenty-one.

This young woman's character is by no means easy to ascertain. The court chronicler whom I have already quoted says with unqualified praise: "She was fair of body, lovely of face, and utterly pure of soul." Her most recent historian, on the other hand, insists that she was "profoundly vicious and profoundly corrupt", and that this fascinating enchantress, this "crowned siren", was altogether "shameless and lascivious." These are hard words and ugly names, considering the little we know of her. But it should be observed, however, that among her contemporaries and even more among later chroniclers, she had a well-established reputation as a sinister,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

ill-omened woman. One historian says that, in order the quicker to ascend the throne, she and her husband poisoned the Emperor her father-in-law. Other writers say that, when her husband died, it was common talk in the capital that Theophano had administered poison to him. If other reports are to be believed, she rid herself thus of a prince of the family of Romanus Lecapenus who seemed likely to become a possible rival and pretender to the throne, and thus likewise she is said to have revenged herself upon her lover John Tzimisces for having abandoned her. Armenian chroniclers go so far as to say that the "infamous Empress" intended poisoning her own sons. But all these tales, told by people not living at court, and dating for the most part from one or two centuries after her time, are of small significance. Some of these ugly rumours are flatly contradicted by the facts; others seem really too incredible. Besides which, we must not forget that when Theophano actually made up her mind to commit a crime — a thing which happened at least once in her life — it was not by poison that she did the deed, but frankly and openly by the sword.

This observation must not be taken as an attempt on my part to rehabilitate Theophano. But there are plenty of known facts to lay at her door without swelling the indictment unnecessarily by the addition of vague epithets, and assertions that cannot be proved. As I see her, she is above all else ambitious, with a lust for power and influence, and capable of anything, even crime, to hold the throne to which she had attained; often intriguing, sometimes violent and passionate, unscrupulous always; when her inter-

THEOPHANO

ests, dislikes, or fancies were involved, dissimulating and perfidious. On ascending the throne, she exercised great influence over Romanus II, and would allow no one else to share it with her. Not only were all the favourites of the preceding reign dismissed and all the principal personnel of the administration changed; but the young Empress's first act, when she had become mistress in the Palace, was to send away her mother-in-law, the Basilissa Helena, and her five sisters-in-law.

These were charming princesses, and had been admirably educated by an adoring father. Under the government of Constantine VII they had even taken part from time to time in affairs of State; one of them, Agatha, the old Emperor's favourite, often acted as his secretary, and the various departments and the officials were aware of her influence. This did not suit Theophano's book. She therefore extracted an order out of the feeble Romanus inviting them to enter a convent. In vain their mother pleaded for them; in vain the young girls, clinging closely to one another, begged with tears to be spared. All was to no purpose. The Basilissa Helena alone was allowed to dwell in the Palace, where she died in sorrow a few months later. Her daughters were obliged to bow to Theophano's inflexible will and enter the cloister, and, by a refinement of cruelty, were even separated from one another. The princesses made a last vain resistance. When the Patriarch Polyeuctes had cut off their hair, and they had been clad in the religious habit, they protested, pulling off their sackcloth garments and insisting on eating meat every day. Romanus finally allowed

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

them the same fare and the same state that they had enjoyed in the Sacred Palace. They were none the less for ever dead to the world, and Theophano had won.

Must we believe that, because she acted thus to such near relatives, she next poisoned her husband? "Most people suspect" says Leo Diaconus, a contemporary, concerning the death of Romanus II, "that poison was administered to him in the Gynaecium." This terrible accusation clearly demonstrates what the people of her time thought Theophano capable of; and it is certain that a woman who could have her second husband assassinated in order to marry a third, might just as well have had the first poisoned so as to marry the second. Nevertheless, the historian's accusation, grave as it is, seems in this case utterly absurd. In the first place, the chroniclers have given us a perfectly satisfactory explanation of the premature death of the young Emperor, exhausted in his youth by the love of pleasure and excesses of all kinds; and the very writer who brings poison into the affair mentions elsewhere that the Basileus died of internal complications resulting from a wild ride. But, above all, what object could Theophano have had in getting rid of her husband? She was Empress, she was all-powerful; she was furthermore on the best of terms with Romanus, to whom, in their six and a half years of married life, she had borne four children — only two days before his death she had given birth to her daughter Anna. Why should she have poisoned the Basileus, when his death, by leaving her alone with infant children, would expose her, more than any

THEOPHANO

other conjuncture, to the sudden loss of the power she loved? Theophano was too intelligent to run such a risk groundlessly.

But it is worthy of special observation that in the facts just cited there is really nothing that can be characterised as vicious, wanton, or lewd. So long as Romanus II lived there is every reason to believe that his young wife's conduct was irreproachable. After his death she married, chiefly for reasons of State, a man some thirty years her senior; but such an event is neither rare nor extraordinary in the lives of sovereigns or even of private folk; and, without laying stress on the point that it was perhaps Theophano's only means of saving the throne for her sons, at least she can hardly be blamed for believing that supreme power was worth some sacrifice. The only serious accusation that one can make against her is not that five years later she deceived this old husband of hers with a younger lover — for, however deplorable, this is not an exceptional occurrence —, but that when she wanted to marry the latter she did not hesitate to rid herself of the Basileus, her husband, by a horrible murder. It must be added, moreover, that she made bitter expiation for her crime.

II

At the time of Romanus II's sudden death, on the 15th of March 963, Theophano was twenty-two years of age. She was left alone with four children, two boys and two girls. Without delay she assumed the regency in the name of the two young Porphyrogeniti, Basil, aged five, and Constantine, aged two; but the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

situation was a singularly difficult one for a woman, and even more for an ambitious woman. She found an all-powerful minister in office, the Parakoimomenos Joseph Bringas, who had governed despotically during Romanus's reign, and who might be tempted to get rid of the Regent in order to have the power to himself during the long minority of the young Basileis. And, on the other hand, at the head of the Asiatic army, she found a victorious general, whose ambitions she might well fear, the Domestic of the Scholae, Nicephorus Phocas.

Nicephorus Phocas was at that time the best-known and most popular man in the Empire. He belonged to a great aristocratic family of Cappadocia, he was the descendant of a long line of illustrious generals, and by splendid victories he had still further enhanced his prestige and his fame. Crete, which had fallen to the Arabs fifty years before, he had reconquered; beyond Taurus, into Cilicia, he had carried the imperial standards; the great city of Aleppo he had just taken by storm, thus breaking the pride of the Hamdanid Emirs of Syria. Being an admirable soldier, an able tactician, and an incomparable general, who knew the way to talk to his men and make them follow him anywhere, he was the idol of the soldiers, all of whose fatigues and dangers he shared. "He lived for the army", one of his biographers says of him. Nor was he less popular in Constantinople. When, on returning from the Cretan expedition, he had celebrated a triumph in the Hippodrome, he had astonished the city by the splendours of the stately procession, "in the course of which all the wealth of the barbarians seemed to flow

THEOPHANO

into the circus in an immense and never-ending flood." The recipient of as many honours "as in olden times the generals of Rome had received", immensely rich, maintaining in his Asiatic domains retinues of vassals passionately devoted to his person, he was loved and admired by all; he seemed the only leader capable of defending the Empire against the Saracens, and Romanus II, on his death-bed, had given explicit directions that he should be continued in undisturbed possession of his command.

Whereas to a statesman such a man might seem a formidable danger, it should be remarked that in the eyes of a young woman this victorious general had none of the attributes of a hero of romance. Nicephorus Phocas, in 963, was fifty-one years of age, and not beautiful to look at. He was a little man, rather fat, with a powerful body set on short legs, and he had, furthermore, a large head, a very dark, sunburnt skin, and long black hair; his nose was aquiline, his beard short and grizzled, and his black eyes, under their heavy eyebrows, were thoughtful and sad. Liudprand, Bishop of Cremona, who came on an embassy to his court, says that he was of unusual ugliness, "as black of skin as a negro, and terrifying to one who might chance upon him in the dark." Furthermore, he was hard and austere, of melancholic disposition, and habitually taciturn. Since the loss of his wife, and the death of his only son in an unfortunate accident, he had become an ardent devotee of religion and mysticism. He had taken a vow of chastity, he no longer ate meat, he slept on the ground like an ascetic in the hair-shirt of his uncle Malinus, a religious, who had died in the odour of

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

sanctity, and he took pleasure in the society of monks. For his spiritual director, he had chosen Athanasius, the future founder of the oldest monastery on Mt. Athos, and, feeling unable to do without his advice, kept him with him even in camp. In the society of this holy man he conceived like him a longing for the religious life, and thought very seriously of retiring from the world. He was actually having a cell constructed for his own use in the monastery that Athanasius was building on the Holy Mountain. Ascetic and war-like, hard, sober, stern, money-loving but unworldly, capable both of clemency and of perfidy, he, like many of his contemporaries, united in his complex personality the most unexpected contrasts, and under his cold exterior was profoundly passionate.

It is very hard to tell whether or not he was ambitious. With devoted and victorious troops at his command, Nicephorus Phocas was in a position to risk everything in the crisis arising from the death of Romanus II; and the temptation to revolt was the stronger because his own personal safety seemed to demand the step. The general knew that Bringas hated him, and that he had everything to fear from the all-powerful minister. At first, however, as a loyal and pious soldier, concerned chiefly with the war against the infidel, he made no move. And his final determination to take sides was almost entirely due to Theophano.

One must beware of introducing too many romantic touches into the story of the relations between Nicephorus Phocas and the fair Empress. It is certain that during the lifetime of Romanus II there

THEOPHANO

was neither affection nor intrigue uniting the Basilissa and the Domestic of the Scholae. But after her husband's death, the Regent soon understood that, among the many perils threatening her, the general was a real power, whom she could make use of to offset the ambitions of Bringas. She saw that in order to retain the throne she would have to win over Nicephorus to her side, and, being an attractive woman, she doubtless felt that it would not be a difficult task. In any case, it was due to the Empress's initiative, and in spite of the Prime Minister's opposition, that Phocas was summoned to the capital; and it seems that he was not long in falling a victim to her charms and in espousing her cause. "It was well known in Byzantium" says M. Schlumberger, "that the exquisite sovereign's intoxicating charm had made an ineradicable impression upon the simple soul of the austere Domestic of the Scholae." It may be imagined indeed, though contemporary evidence is slight, that, whereas at first Nicephorus's relations with the Regent had been confined to business and routine, he soon gave evidence of his love and declared himself ready to do anything to win her. There are no grounds for believing that Theophano reciprocated his affection — indeed, she never loved him; but she fully realised the great power that he wielded and the use she could make of it to further her interests and her ambition. For political reasons she encouraged his passion, just as later, for the same motives, she married him.

It must also be observed that, during his stay in Constantinople, another and no less decisive reason was added to Theophano's charms to overcome

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Nicephorus's hesitancy. This was the revelation which he had of Bringas's implacable hatred. Of course the Prime Minister had been unable to refuse the general a new and splendid triumph. But the increasing popularity of Phocas disturbed the statesman, who is said, furthermore, to have suspected that a plot was being hatched by the Domestic of the Scholae and the Regent. In vain Nicephorus, with the tortuous diplomacy so dear to Byzantine hearts, tried to calm the apprehension of the Parakoimomenos by announcing openly that his one desire was to embrace the religious life. Bringas was not deceived. Blinding seemed to him the surest way of getting rid of his rival. Phocas, fortunately for himself, when he was summoned to the Palace on some pretext, was either suspicious or else had received a friendly warning, for he took refuge in the Great Church and besought the Patriarch's protection. Polyeuctes had his faults; he was obstinate, unyielding, narrow-minded, and short-sighted; but he was courageous and outspoken, and he disliked the Prime Minister. He hurried off to the Sacred Palace, insisted that the Senate should be convoked without delay, and expressed himself with such energy and directness that Nicephorus was continued in his command with extraordinary powers, in spite of Bringas's ill will. The Domestic of the Scholae immediately left the city and went to his head-quarters at Caesarea; he was master of the situation.

In these intrigues and counter-intrigues Theophano did not appear openly. It is, nevertheless, highly probable that she helped her ally to the utmost of her ability, and backed up the intervention of the

THEOPHANO

Patriarch Polyeuctes with all her might. Similarly in the events that followed, when, in July, 963, circumstances obliged Phocas to declare himself; when, more and more threatened by Bringas's hatred, and fearing for his life, the general unwillingly allowed himself to be proclaimed Basileus by his troops, and in the camp at Caesarea put on the purple buskins; and when at last, in August, 963, he appeared before Constantinople, and a popular revolution, sweeping away Bringas and his friends, opened the gates of the capital to the usurper, Theophano played no visible part and seemed willing to let events take their course. But, as a matter of fact, if Nicephorus Phocas had become ambitious, and if then, in spite of his hesitations and scruples, he had decided to assume the purple, the love that the beautiful Empress had inspired in his breast had figured largely in his resolve. And likewise, during the tragic days of August, 963, when the mob "in a fury of madness" were charging the Minister's soldiers and destroying his palace, and when the Patriarch Polyeuctes and the former Parakoimomenos Basil were in apparent charge of the movement in favour of the pretender, we may well believe that, in the depths of the Gynaecium, Theophano had come to a private understanding with the leaders of the revolt. Although her name is nowhere mentioned, this intriguing, ambitious woman was the very soul of the great events that had just taken place.

However it may have been, on the morning of the 16th of August 963, Nicephorus Phocas made his solemn entry into Constantinople. On horseback, in the imperial robes of state, he passed through the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Golden Gate amid the acclamations of the entire city, hailed by the people as the saviour of the Empire and of Christianity. "The State insists that Nicephorus be Basileus!" cried the enthusiastic mob as he went by. "The Palace awaits Nicephorus! The army calls for Nicephorus! The world looks to Nicephorus! Such are the wishes of the Palace, the Army, the Senate, and the People! Lord, hear our prayer! Long live Nicephorus!" Riding up the Mesé, he reached the Forum of Constantine, where, in the Church of the Theotokos, he devoutly said his prayers; thence he walked in procession, the Holy Cross in front, to St. Sophia, where he was received by the Patriarch, and there he went, holding lighted candles, to prostrate himself before the holy altars. Then, ascending the ambo with Polyeuctes, he was solemnly crowned Basileus of the Romans, as colleague of the two young Emperors, Basil and Constantine. This done, he entered the Sacred Palace. To complete his happiness there remained only the sweetest recompense of his ambitions, the hope of which had armed him and led him forth; there remained only to wed Theophano.

Certain chroniclers say, however, that the Empress was at first obliged by the new master to leave the Palace. If that is true, it can have been nothing but a ruse; the allies had had an understanding for several months past. There is not the slightest doubt that Nicephorus was passionately in love with the young woman, and reasons of State, furthermore, suggested such a marriage as a sort of legitimation of his assumption of the purple. Theophano, though, according to some writers, unenthusiastic over this new marriage, felt it to be her only means of re-

THEOPHANO

taining the power, and was therefore quite willing. The two partners thus had little difficulty in persuading one another. On the 20th of September 963, in the New Church, the marriage was solemnly performed.

Nicephorus was at the pinnacle of joy. He took new interest in life. He utterly forgot his austerities, his mystical dreams, and his promises, in the happiness of possessing Theophano. But, unlike him, his friends the monks had not forgotten the past. When Athanasius, in his solitude on Athos, heard of the imperial marriage, he hurried off to Constantinople, frustrated in his hopes and deeply offended. On being received by the Emperor he treated him with his usual freedom and reproached him harshly for having broken his word and for the scandal he had caused. Phocas exerted himself to calm the monk. He explained that it was not for his own pleasure that he had accepted the throne, and swore that he intended to live with Theophano as with a sister; he promised that as soon as affairs of State should permit he intended to come and join the brothers in the monastery. To these fair words he added splendid gifts, and Athanasius returned somewhat mollified to the Holy Mountain.

In Constantinople the astonishment caused by the marriage was no less, and the scandal greater. The Patriarch Polyeuctes was, as we have seen, a virtuous, austere man, uncompromising towards the things of this world, from which he was completely detached, concerned solely with the duties and interests of the Church, whose chief he was, and endowed with unconquerable courage, inflexible

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

obstinacy, and formidable frankness. His first act on becoming Patriarch had been severely to reprimand the Emperor Constantine VII, so pious a man and with such respect for sacred things; this time his ardent, unbending temperament shewed itself more harshly still. It was not that he felt the slightest hostility towards Nicephorus, nor that he intended to oppose him as a usurper; in the revolution of 963 he had given evidence of his devotion to Phocas, and his attitude had helped not a little in the overthrow of Bringas and in the success of the Domestic of the Scholae. But, on the ground of canon law, he considered intolerable the marriage of the Basileus, a widower, with a Princess likewise widowed; and when Nicephorus, in accordance with his privilege as Emperor, attempted to pass through the iconostasis at St. Sophia to receive communion, the Patriarch stoutly forbade him to approach the altar, and as penance for his second marriage laid this inhibition on him for the space of a year. The Emperor, despite his irritation, had to give way before the Patriarch's uncompromising firmness.

Soon another difficulty arose. Polyeuctes learnt that Nicephorus had stood godfather to one of Theophano's children. Now, in ecclesiastical law, a spiritual relationship of this kind was an absolute impediment to the marriage that had been contracted; and the Patriarch, without mincing words, gave the Basileus his choice between repudiating Theophano and the interdict. For so pious a man as Phocas such a threat was peculiarly serious. Nevertheless, the flesh was weak; Nicephorus refused to separate from Theophano, and thus did not pause at

THEOPHANO

precipitating a grave quarrel between State and Church. At last, however, an arrangement was effected. A priest came forward and swore that the godfather of the imperial child had been Bardas, the Emperor's father, and not Nicephorus himself. Polyeuctes saw through the falsehood; but as he was abandoned by all, even by his clergy, he yielded to necessity and professed to believe what he was told. In his distress he did not even insist that the Emperor should carry out the penance which had been imposed on account of his second marriage. But the Basileus was none the less extremely irritated by this attack upon his prestige and upon his love. He never forgave Polyeuctes for his unseasonable interference, and Theophano was no less bitter towards the prelate. The Emperor and his wife never succeeded in living the matter down; a few years later Liudprand, echoing the stories that were current in Constantinople, says outspokenly that Nicephorus's marriage was incestuous.

III

A marriage so ill assorted and so inauspiciously begun ran great risks of coming to grief. And this indeed was the swift result. Here again detailed information upon the private life of the imperial household during these six years is of the scantiest; and the part that Theophano, with her usual caution and cleverness, played in it must be rather inferred from hints than ascertained from direct testimony. We have to content ourselves with a general view of the situation and of the tragedy in which it ended.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Madly in love with Theophano and intoxicated with her radiant beauty, Nicephorus, to quote the reserved, laconic phrase of Leo Diaconus, did "more than was proper." This serious, austere, parsimonious man loaded the beautiful Princess with sumptuous gifts, marvellous garments, and splendid jewels; he surrounded her with all the refinements of the most dazzling luxury; he presented her with a fortune in estates and villas. "Nothing was too costly," says M. Schlumberger, "nothing too beautiful to give his beloved Empress." He was totally unable to tear himself away from her. When, in 964, he left to rejoin the army, he took Theophano along with him, and for the first time, perhaps, in the course of his long military career, interrupted a campaign to return the sooner to her.

But at bottom this old soldier was nothing of a courtier. After a brief interval of passion, war, his old love, reasserted her supremacy over him; every year he left for the frontier to fight Arabs, Bulgars, or Russians, and now he no longer took Theophano with him. Furthermore, he prided himself on being a conscientious Emperor; and so, little by little, the once-beloved Prince became more and more unpopular. The people, groaning under the weight of taxation; the clergy, whose privileges Nicephorus diminished; the monks, whose enormous landed property he tried to reduce; did not hide their discontent. The Patriarch was in open opposition to the Emperor. Rioting broke out in the capital. Nicephorus was insulted and stoned by the mob; and, in spite of the admirable composure which he displayed on this occasion, he would have lost his

THEOPHANO

life if his friends had not dragged him away in the nick of time. Lastly, he became a prey to the same religious mysticism that had troubled him in the past; he became melancholy, and would no longer sleep in his imperial bed, but lay down in a corner on a panther-skin with a purple pillow on it, and he resumed the hair-shirt of his uncle Malinus. He was anxious, disturbed, and preoccupied; he feared for his safety, and turned the Palace of the Bucoleon into a fortress. Undoubtedly he still adored Theophano, and was more subject to her soft, hidden influence than was prudent or reasonable. But the contrast between the rough soldier and the elegant Princess was too pronounced. He wearied her, and she was bored. The consequences were serious.

Nicephorus had a nephew, John Tzimisces. He was forty-five years of age, short, but well built and very elegant. He was white of skin, with blue eyes, a halo of light-golden hair, a reddish beard, a delicate and beautiful nose, and a bold look — a man who feared nothing and nobody. Being likewise strong, clever, agile, open-handed, and magnificent, and a bit of a rake into the bargain, he was very fascinating. Theophano in her boredom naturally found him pleasant; and it was now that passion led her on to crime. Tzimisces was ambitious; he was vastly irritated, moreover, at the disgrace which had befallen him: as the result of an incident of war, the Emperor had degraded him from his post of Domestic of the Oriental Scholae and had invited him to retire to his estates, and his one thought was to revenge himself for an outrage that he deemed unmerited. Theophano, for her part, was utterly

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

weary of Nicephorus; their former understanding had been succeeded by dislike and suspicion, and the Empress even affected to fear that her husband intended to make some attempt upon the lives of her sons. She was still more impatient at being separated from her lover, for Tzimisces seems to have been the great and probably the only real love of her life. In these circumstances she surrendered herself gradually to the contemplation of a most revolting crime.

Nicephorus, since his return from Syria, at the beginning of 969, had been a prey to dark forebodings. He had a feeling that plots were being hatched against him in the dark. The death of his aged father, the Caesar Bardas Phocas, had increased his melancholy. However, he still loved Theophano. The latter perfidiously used her influence to have Tzimisces recalled to court. She pointed out to the Emperor how annoying it was to have to forego the services of such a man; and very cleverly, in order to prevent Nicephorus from becoming suspicious at too open an espousal of John's cause, talked of marrying him to one of her relatives. The Basileus, as usual, gave way to his wife's wishes. John returned to Constantinople; and, owing to channels of information skilfully contrived by Theophano in concert with some of her household, the two lovers met in the Palace itself, unknown to Nicephorus, and prepared their plot. No less was planned than the assassination of the Basileus. Among the discontented generals John readily found accomplices; many conferences were held between the conspirators and between Tzimisces and the Empress; at last,

THEOPHANO

thanks to the many ramifications of the Gynaecium, armed men were smuggled into the Palace and hidden in the Augusta's apartments.

Leo Diaconus, who has left us a very striking account of the drama, says that it was now early December. The murder had been set for the night between the 10th and the 11th. The day before, several of the conspirators, dressed as women, had, with Theophano's aid, entered the Sacred Palace. This time the Emperor was mysteriously warned, and he gave orders to one of his officers to search the women's quarters; but, whether the search was carelessly carried out, or whether by deliberate intention, no one was discovered. Meanwhile, night had fallen; they awaited only the coming of Tzimisces to strike the blow. The conspirators became apprehensive; if the Emperor were to lock himself in his room, if they had to break open the door and he were to awake, would it not ruin everything? Theophano, with revolting composure, took upon herself to overcome this obstacle. At a late hour she went to see Nicephorus in his apartments and chatted pleasantly with him; then, on pretext of having to visit some young Bulgarian women staying in the Palace, she went out, saying that she would be back presently and asking him to leave the door open: she would close it on her return. Nicephorus agreed, and when he was left alone said his prayers and fell asleep.

It was about eleven o'clock at night. Outside, snow was falling, and on the Bosphorus the wind was blowing a hurricane. In a little boat John Tzimisces reached the deserted strip of shore under the walls of the imperial castle of the Bucoleon. By

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

means of a basket fastened to a rope he was hoisted up to the Gynaecium, and at the head of the conspirators went to the sovereign's bedchamber. They had a moment of fright, for the bed was empty. But a eunuch of the Gynaecium, who was acquainted with Nicephorus's habits, pointed out the Basileus lying asleep in a corner on his panther-skin. They rushed furiously at him, whereupon he awoke and jumped up. One of the conspirators with his sword split open the Emperor's head to the eyebrows. The wretched man, drenched in blood, cried out: "Mother of God, help me!" The murderers, paying no heed, dragged him to the feet of Tzimisces, who abused him indecently and tore out his beard. At this they all fell upon the poor creature, who was now in the last throes. Finally John, with a kick, turned him over and, drawing his sword, struck him a great blow on the head; another of the assassins finished him off. The Emperor fell dead, bathed in his blood.

At the noise of the struggle, the soldiers of the guard hurried to the scene, but arrived too late. They were shewn by torch-light at a window the severed, bleeding head of their master. This tragic sight stifled at once all thought of resistance. The people followed the Empress's example and proclaimed Tzimisces Emperor.

IV

Theophano, who had arranged everything, who had, as it were, led the assassins by the hand, expected to profit greatly by the murder. But history contains some examples of poetic justice, as the Basilissa was shortly to learn.

THEOPHANO

Once more the Patriarch Polyeuctes gave evidence of his indomitable energy. He had been openly at odds with the dead sovereign. Nevertheless, when John appeared at the gates of St. Sophia to assume the imperial crown in the Great Church, the prelate inflexibly refused him admittance on the ground that he was stained with the blood of his relative and master, and gave him to understand that he would be denied access to the holy place until the murderers had been punished and Theophano driven from the Palace. As between the throne and his mistress, Tzimisces did not hesitate a moment. He impudently denied that he had had any share in the crime; and, the better to clear himself, complied with the orders of Polyeuctes, betraying his associates and sacrificing Theophano. She had dreamed of marrying the man she loved, and of sharing with him the power so dear to her; but it was her lover himself who decided her downfall. He exiled her to one of the convents of Proti, in the Princes' Islands.

But, with all her energy, and with the knowledge that she was still beautiful — she was scarcely twenty-nine —, Theophano refused to resign herself to disgrace. A few months later she escaped from prison and took refuge in St. Sophia. Was it that she counted on her lover's affection? Was it that she hoped that, after the initial difficulties had been surmounted, Tzimisces in gratitude would take her back again? Did she flatter herself that the very sight of her would win him over? It is indeed probable. But the all-powerful minister who directed the policy of the new reign, the Parakoimomenos Basil, made short work of the fascinating Empress's

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

attempt. Disregarding the sanctity of the place, he had her dragged away from the Great Church and decided to send her to a more distant exile in Armenia. All that she could obtain was permission to see a last time before departing the man for whom she had sacrificed everything, and who was abandoning her. This final interview, at which the Parakoimomenos took the precaution of being present, seems to have been extraordinarily violent. Theophano reviled Tzimisces unmercifully, and then, in a paroxysm of rage, fell upon the minister with her fists. She had to be dragged out of the audience-chamber. Her life was over.

What became of her in her melancholy exile? What sufferings did she endure in the distant convent wherein she dragged out her life, far from the splendours of the court, far from the elegance of the Sacred Palace, with the bitterness of her frustrated hopes and the regret of her lost power? No one knows. At all events, if she had been guilty, she paid dearly for her crime. Six years she languished in her solitude, until Tzimisces's death. She was then, in 976, recalled to Constantinople by her sons, who had now become the actual rulers. But, whether her pride was broken and her ambition burnt out, or whether, as is more likely, the Parakoimomenos Basil, who was still all-powerful, had made it a condition of her return, she seems never again to have taken any part in affairs of State. She died in obscurity in the Palace, the date of her death being unknown. And thus to the very end this ambitious, fascinating, perverse Princess remains to some extent an enigma and a mystery.

X

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

I

IN the month of November, 1028, Constantine VIII, Emperor of Byzantium, realising that he was very ill, and being moreover nearly seventy years of age, decided that it was time to settle the succession to the throne. One may, perhaps, be astonished that, as the last male representative of the Macedonian dynasty, he had not previously thought of arranging so important and necessary a matter. The truth is that all his life Constantine VIII had never thought of anything at all.

Having been from childhood the colleague of his brother Basil II, he had lived for fifty years in the shadow of this energetic and mighty sovereign, taking no interest in public matters and accepting only the advantages and pleasures of power. Then, when Basil's death had left him sole ruler of the Empire, he had been unable to abandon his old, accustomed habits, and had continued as before to lead his own life to the neglect of all else. He was a great spendthrift, and had squandered with open hands his brother's patiently-accumulated savings. A devotee of pleasure and of the table — he excelled in ordering a dinner, and occasionally condescended to invent a sauce to suit himself —, he had entered

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

with such fervour into these amusements that he had become so gouty as hardly to be able to walk. In addition, he adored the Hippodrome, was passionately interested in the circus contests, and doted on animal fights and on spectacles. He loved gambling, and when once he had the dice in his hands, everything else, the reception of ambassadors, business that needed his attention, was all forgotten. At such times he even forgot his chief pleasure, the table, and spent whole nights in play. One can understand that, between so many absorbing occupations, it had slipped his mind that he was the last male of his race, and that his sole heirs were his three unmarried daughters.

Their names were Eudocia, Zoë, and Theodora. Concerning the eldest, Eudocia, history has little to say. She was a woman of simple tastes, moderate intelligence, and equally moderate looks: an illness in early childhood had ruined her beauty for ever. While quite young she entered a convent, and is heard of no more. Her two sisters were totally different and very much more interesting; but they had both, by a curious chance, been left to grow old in the obscurity of the Gynaecium. Neither their uncle Basil, who nevertheless liked them well enough, but who seems to have had a certain contempt for women — he himself had never married —, nor their father Constantine, had ever bothered to find husbands for them. In 1028 they were very old maids: Zoë was fifty, and Theodora but little less.

It was upon these two somewhat ripe princesses that, after the death of Constantine VIII, the throne would devolve. But although, since the foundation

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

of the Macedonian house, the hereditary principle had made sufficient progress in Byzantium for no one to take umbrage at the Empire passing to women, the Basileus thought that in the circumstances a man would not be out of place in the Palace, and hastily sought a husband to play the part of Prince Consort for his favourite daughter Zoë, whom he considered the better suited to the throne. He hit upon an Armenian nobleman, Constantine Dalasenus, and had him sent for. But Constantine was far from the capital, on his estates, and time was short. Then, changing his mind, the Emperor turned to the Praefect of the City, Romanus Argyrus. He was a handsome man, of good family, over sixty years of age; unfortunately, he was married and loved his wife, who adored him. This did not deter Constantine VIII. When he wanted anything, he employed expeditious means and unanswerable arguments: he gave Romanus the choice between divorce and blinding, and to hasten his surrender and, above all, his wife's, pretended to be furiously angry and ordered the Praefect's immediate arrest. Thereupon Romanus's wife, in great distress, realised that, if she wished to save her husband, she had only to disappear; so she hastily entered a convent, and Romanus married Zoë. Three days later Constantine VIII died contented, and his two daughters and his son-in-law ascended the throne.

For nearly a quarter of a century Zoë Porphyrogenita was destined to make the Imperial Palace hum with her scandalous behaviour; and the story of her life is certainly one of the raciest in all Byzantine history, and one of the most familiar. Whereas

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

we are so ill informed about the majority of the Empresses who reigned in the Sacred Palace that we can with difficulty form even the slightest notion of them, Zoë stands forth in the full light of day. She has had the good fortune — for us — to have as biographer one of the most intelligent and remarkable men that Byzantium ever produced, namely Michael Psellus, whose chronicle, or rather comments on the history of his own times, was published some fifty years ago.

Knowing the Empress well, and acquainted, in his capacity as Grand Chamberlain and minister, with all the court intrigues, interested in everything that took place, eager for every bit of gossip, and very indiscreet and loquacious into the bargain, Psellus has, with admirable complaisance and often with extraordinary freedom of language, revealed everything he saw or heard. There is no secret hidden from him, no detail, even the most intimate, that he has not in some way become acquainted with; and as he had a deep fund of wit, humour, and malice, the story he tells is one of the raciest and most pungent to be found anywhere. Doubtless, we must not take all he says literally: at times he makes a wide detour around the facts, when politics, in which he played a great part, are too directly involved; but with practically this one exception he is very trustworthy; and since his natural idle curiosity, always on the watch for the slightest event, impelled him early in life to be observant, he is usually perfectly informed. And then it is such good luck to find, among so many dry, boring chroniclers, one who can both use his eyes and write, a master

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

of the difficult art of portraiture, an incomparable teller of spicy tales. It has been said, without too much exaggeration, that Psellus reminds one of Voltaire; and, as a matter of fact, he touched on everything and wrote of everything. Besides his history, we have hundreds of little treatises from his pen on the most diverse subjects: speeches and verses, letters and pamphlets, philosophical treatises, works on physics, on astronomy, on physiology, and even on demonology. And like Voltaire he touches everything with a caustic wit, a malicious humour, and a universal curiosity. By the boldness of his conceptions and the originality of his ideas Psellus was one of the most eminent men of his time; by his love of classical antiquity and of Platonic philosophy he, living in the eleventh century, is a kind of forerunner of the renaissance.

His character was, undoubtedly, not the equal of his intellect. His mediocrity of soul, his love of intrigue, his servile flatteries, his rapid and scandalous changes of side, and his childish, unhealthy vanity, shew that Psellus is but too perfect a specimen of the court life and of the corrupt Byzantine society in which he lived. But, on the other hand, he helps us so well to understand it all that he is really invaluable. In our narrative we shall have constantly to return to his book; and to it I must often refer the reader when his anecdotes, though always amusing and witty, become much too embarrassing to translate.

II

At the time when Zoë, with her husband, Romanus, ascended the throne of Byzantium, she was, we are

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

told, still perfectly charming, despite her fifty summers. Psellus, who knew her well, has drawn a very interesting portrait of her. She seems to have resembled her uncle Basil: she had large eyes under heavy eyebrows, a slightly aquiline nose, and beautiful fair hair. Her complexion and her whole body were of dazzling whiteness; she was of incomparable grace and most harmoniously proportioned. "Anyone not knowing her age" says Psellus, "would have taken her for a young girl." She had not a single wrinkle: "Every part of her" says the historian, "was firm and in good condition." She was of medium height, but slender and well made, and she had a very elegant figure. And although later in life she grew somewhat fatter, her face remained to the end remarkably young. At the age of seventy-two, when her trembling hands and her bent back betrayed her age, "her face" says Psellus, "was radiant with youthful beauty." She had a regal manner and a bearing truly imperial. But she was not overfond of the troublesome demands of ceremonial. Being very careful of her beauty, she preferred simple dresses to the heavy, gold-embroidered gowns decreed by etiquette, the massive diadem and the splendid jewels. "She clothed her beautiful body" says her biographer, "in filmy garments." On the other hand, she was devoted to perfumes and cosmetics, and imported them from Ethiopia and India; and her apartments, in which great fires were kept burning all the year round for the preparation of the salves and lotions that her women made for her, had the appearance of a laboratory. And there it was that she preferred to spend her time; she did

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

not care much for fresh air, for walking in the gardens, or for anything that might sully her borrowed loveliness and impair a beauty that she was already obliged to take great care of.

Zoë was moderately intelligent, absolutely ignorant, lively, enthusiastic, and irritable. Gaily and thoughtlessly she decided matters of life and death, quick to take sides and to change them; with but little logic or stability of mind, she treated affairs of State with the same frivolity as the amusements of the Gynaeceum. In spite of her beauty she made a sufficiently incapable sovereign, since she was rather silly, very vain, childish, capricious, volatile, and quite open to flattery. A compliment delighted her. She was enchanted when one spoke of the antiquity of her lineage or of the glories of her uncle Basil, and even more enchanted when one spoke of herself. And it became a game among the courtiers to make her believe that no one could look at her without being immediately struck dumb with amazement. She was extravagant with regard to herself, absurdly generous to others, and affected an insane prodigality; but on occasion she could be inexorable and cruel. Like all her contemporaries she was pious; but it was an exclusively external piety, of the kind that burns incense before icons, and lights candles on altars. Public matters bored her, nor did women's work interest her either. She did not care for embroidery, weaving, or spinning, but would sit idle for hours at a time, fatuously. One can thus understand that her active, untiring uncle Basil, though fond of her, must have rather despised her.

This blonde, soft, silly creature had, moreover,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

none too good blood in her veins. As the granddaughter of that Romanus II who died young from the results of fast living, and of the notorious Theophano, and daughter of such an idler as Constantine VIII, she had every right to the amorous temperament which she was soon to manifest. Very proud of her beauty, convinced that she was irresistible, furious at having had to waste the best years of her youth in the Gynaecium, full of unsatisfied desires, and fascinated by the call of the unknown, she was now, at the age of fifty and more, to fill court and town with her scandalous behaviour, and with such passion and with so little restraint that her contemporaries were often in doubt as to her entire sanity.

Romanus Argyrus, finding himself married to a woman so headstrong and so eager for new sensations, felt that he owed it to himself, to Zoë, to the late Emperor his father-in-law, and to the State, to produce an heir to the throne as soon as possible. And at this point already I am obliged to refer the reader to Psellus to learn by what means — both magical and physiological —, by what learned combinations of unguents, massage, and amulets, Romanus and Zoë set to work to realise their desire. But, whilst engaged in these exercises, the Emperor soon awoke to the fact that he was sixty, which was considerable, and that the Empress was fifty, which was excessive; and so, leaving his wife and considerations of State in the lurch, he devoted himself to the government of the Empire.

The lady had not reckoned on such treatment. Deeply wounded in her pride, to begin with, at being

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

thus scorned, Zoë had other grounds for discontent, unconnected with either vanity or considerations of State; as a crowning misfortune, and as if to cap the climax, Romanus in forsaking her society had had the idea of putting an immediate stop to her ridiculous extravagance. Furiously angry, and feeling more keenly than ever a longing for adventures, Zoë cast about for consolation and found it without difficulty. She singled out Constantine, the High Steward, and after him another Constantine of the great house of Monomachus, whose relationship to the Emperor had gained him admittance to the Palace. They both pleased her for a while on account of their good looks, their charm, and their youth; but their favour was not of long duration. Soon Zoë's choice settled upon another lover. Among the intimates of Romanus III was a eunuch named John, an astute, corrupt man and a great favourite of the Emperor. This John had a brother named Michael, a remarkably handsome fellow with sparkling eyes, a clear skin, and a fine figure, whom the poets of the time unanimously praise for his captivating charm. John presented him at court: he pleased the Emperor, who took him into his service; and he pleased the Empress even more, so that she suddenly developed an overwhelming passion for him. And, as Psellus says, "since she was incapable of controlling her desires, she knew no rest until the handsome Michael had reciprocated her affection."

There followed a thoroughly amusing little comedy in the Palace, which Psellus has maliciously related. Hitherto Zoë had heartily detested the eunuch John; but now, in order to have excuses to talk with the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

man she loved, she treated him with cordiality, and sent for him to inform his brother that he would always receive a warm welcome from his sovereign whenever he should appear in her presence. The young man, not in the least understanding this sudden and extraordinary kindness, came to Zoë in some embarrassment, worried and blushing, to bow and scrape. But the Princess encouraged him; she smiled at him pleasantly, relaxed the sternness of her awful brow, and even alluded in discreet terms to her sentiments. Schooled, however, by his brother, Michael finally understood. He grew audacious; from loving attitudes he passed to kisses; soon he became more daring still, "less fascinated perhaps" says the impertinent Psellus, "by the lady's over-ripe charms than flattered in his pride by the glory of an imperial adventure." Zoë was very seriously in love, and committed every kind of imprudence. She was to be seen kissing her lover in public and sitting with him on the same couch. Naturally, she delighted in decking her favourite like an idol; she covered him with jewels and fine clothes, and showered him with magnificent presents. She went even further; one day she conceived the idea of making him sit upon the Emperor's very throne, crowned and sceptred, and pressing him close to her, called him by the most loving names: "My idol, my flower of beauty, joy of my eyes, consolation of my soul." One of the inmates of the Palace, happening to enter the room, nearly swooned at the shock of this unexpected scene; but Zoë, unabashed, ordered him to prostrate himself at Michael's feet, saying: "He is henceforth Emperor; one day he will be so in very truth."

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

The entire court knew of their liaison. Romanus was, of course, the only one who perceived nothing. Some of his intimate friends and his sister Pulcheria, who hated the Empress, thought it their duty to enlighten him. But the Emperor refused to believe it, and being a good-natured Prince called Michael to his study, and asked him what truth there was in the tale. Michael protested that he was the innocent victim of odious calumnies, and the Basileus was convinced and liked him even better than before. As a mark of his confidence he went so far as to permit him to enter the imperial bedchamber itself; at night, when he was in bed alongside of Zoë, he used to call the young man to his bed-side and ask him to rub his feet. "Is it conceivable" says a prudish chronicler, "that in doing so he never touched the Basilissa's feet?" Romanus did not bother about that, for he was not a jealous Emperor.

He could reassure himself, furthermore, if he so desired. The handsome Michael suffered from an unpleasant disease: he had attacks of epilepsy. "Such a man" remarked the Emperor, "really could neither love nor inspire love." In the long run, however, Romanus was unable to doubt his misfortune; but being a philosopher he preferred to pay no attention. He understood Zoë, and knew that, if he were to remove Michael, he would run the undoubted risk of seeing her plunge into fresh and more numerous adventures; and considering a single intrigue less injurious to the imperial dignity than a succession of blazing scandals, he systematically shut his eyes to the proof. "And the Empress's liaison" says Psellus, "was publicly established and acquired an almost legal status."

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Romanus, meanwhile, was failing visibly in health. He ate little and slept badly, and his character was undergoing a change. He became violent, irritable, and disagreeable; he no longer laughed; he distrusted everyone and grew angry over nothing, and was in fact wasting away. He insisted on performing conscientiously his duties as Emperor; but under his splendid robes of state he looked a dying man; his face was sunken, his skin was yellow, his breath came short and panting, and his hair fell out by the handful. It appears that Michael and Zoë had been administering a slow poison to the unfortunate monarch — though he scarcely bothered them at all — in order to rid themselves of his troublesome presence. But the poison did not act quickly enough to satisfy the amorous Empress. Consequently on the morning of Holy Thursday, when the Emperor was in his bath, at the moment of dipping his head under the water, as he always did, some servants, who had received orders, held him in that position rather longer than was necessary. He was taken out fainting and three-quarters suffocated, and laid on his bed, breathing with difficulty and unable to speak. When later he regained consciousness, he tried to convey his meaning by signs; but, seeing that no one understood him, he closed his eyes sadly and soon expired. At this occurrence Zoë did not even take the trouble to hide her feelings. On learning of the accident she hurried to the imperial bedchamber to see for herself what her husband's condition was, and did not consider it worth while to be present at the end. She had more important things to think of.

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

III

Zoë's sole aim was to secure the throne for Michael. In vain the courtiers and the old servants of Constantine VIII exhorted her to think it over, to give the crown only to the worthiest, and above all not to put herself too much into her new husband's power. She thought only of her lover. The eunuch John, astute politician that he was, pressed her to decide quickly. "We are all lost" thought he to himself, "if there is any delay." Without waiting, therefore, on the night between Holy Thursday and Good Friday, Zoë sent for Michael to come to the Palace. She made him don the imperial robes, and, putting the crown on his head, sat him on the throne beside herself and commanded all those present to recognise him as their lawful sovereign. The Patriarch, summoned at dead of night, came in haste. He expected to find Romanus, but instead discovered Zoë and Michael in robes of state in the great Golden Triclinium; and the Empress asked him to marry her without delay to the new Basileus. The prelate hesitated; so in order to convince him they made him a splendid present of fifty pounds' weight in gold, and promised him a like sum for his clergy. He yielded to these arguments and obeyed. On the morrow the Senate was convoked to render homage to the new master and to pay their last respects to the old. And while, with face uncovered, according to the custom, Romanus III was being carried away, unrecognisable and already decomposing — Psellus, who saw the procession pass, has left a striking account of it —, in the Sacred Palace the great digni-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

taries were prostrating themselves humbly before Michael and kissing the upstart's hand. Zoë had not remained a widow twenty-four hours.

The soul of the new government was the Emperor's brother, the eunuch John. He was a man who thought and acted with rapidity, hard and haughty of mien, a remarkable politician, and a first-rate financier. He had an excellent knowledge of public affairs, and was in close touch with all that went on in the capital and in the State; and he pursued the realisation of his ideas and ambitions even in the noise of feasts and the tumult of banquets. Amid the glow of festivities he kept close watch upon his companions, and had the valuable power of remembering precisely what those around him had said in their cups, even when he himself had been intoxicated. Thus he inspired a wholesome terror, and was feared more perhaps when drunk than when sober. He was absolutely devoted to his brother, whom he adored, ambitious for him alone, and put at his service his intelligence, his ability, and his deep knowledge of men. It was he who had previously thrown Michael into Zoë's arms; but now that, thanks to her, Michael had become Emperor, he considered gratitude to the Basilissa altogether superfluous. The Basileus after his coronation had been at first very friendly to Zoë, obeying her least wish and seeking every opportunity to please her. But under his brother's influence his attitude soon changed. "It is impossible for me" says Psellus, "either to praise him or blame him for it. I certainly do not approve of ingratitude towards one's benefactress; and yet I cannot blame him for fearing lest he should meet the

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

fate of her first husband." Michael knew Zoë too well not to distrust her.

He began by exiling all on whom she had formerly bestowed her favours. Next, on his brother's advice, he took matters into his own hands and commanded the Empress to confine herself to the Gynaecium, and to refrain in future from appearing in the official processions. At the same time he took away her eunuchs and the most faithful of her women, and in their place put some ladies of his own family to spy upon her. An officer devoted to Michael was appointed Master of Ceremonies to the Empress, and soon she was kept under such strict surveillance that she was allowed to receive no one unless it were known in advance who he was and what he had to say to her. She was forbidden even to leave her apartments, to take a walk, or to go to the baths without the Emperor's express permission. Zoë was exasperated at such treatment, but had no means of resistance. So she put on the best face she could and simulated unalterable sweetness and perfect resignation; she bore without complaint the outrages and humiliations that were meted out to her, never reproaching Michael, inveighing against nobody, and gracious even to her very gaolers. But after all that she had done for her former lover, the blow was as hard as it was unexpected.

The most difficult thing for her to bear was the fact that Michael himself, whom formerly she had loved so well, now kept away from her in horror and refused even to see her. Apart from some embarrassment at having repaid her kindness with such ingratitude, he felt his illness to be gaining upon him;

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

his epileptic fits became worse and more frequent, and he was in constant fear of a seizure in Zoë's presence. Furthermore, as he was not a bad man, he suffered from remorse and tried to make expiation for his sins. All his time was spent in the society of monks; in the Palace he surrounded himself with ascetics, clad in rags picked up in the streets, and as penance he slept humbly at their feet, stretched out on a board with his head upon a stone. He built hospitals and churches; and he had a special devotion for Demetrius, the great saint of Thessalonica, and for Cosmas and Damian the physician-saints, who bore the reputation in Byzantium of being able to cure the most incurable diseases. But nothing served to allay his sufferings or his restlessness. Therefore his spiritual directors, to whom he had confessed his follies and his crimes, ordered him to refrain from all physical connexion with his wife; and he piously followed their directions.

Zoë, cut off from all that she loved, finally revolted. She knew that she was popular in the capital both as a woman and the lawful heir to the monarchy, and also on account of her lavish munificence. She rebelled, therefore, against the treatment which she was receiving; soon she went even further, and is said to have attempted to have the Prime Minister poisoned, hoping that, once removed from his baneful influence, Michael, whom she still loved, would submissively return to her. Her attempt was a failure, and its only result was to increase her troubles. This state of affairs lasted until the Emperor's death. Michael's health was steadily

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

deteriorating, and was still further impaired by the reaction following the burst of energy with which he had overcome the revolted Bulgarians. He felt himself at the point of death. Overwhelmed with remorse and anxious at least to end his life piously, he had himself transported in the month of December, 1041, to a monastery that he had founded, where in accordance with a widespread Byzantine custom he put on the black monastic habit in order to die in the odour of sanctity. When this news was brought to the Imperial Gynaecium, Zoë, wild with grief, and anxious to see for the last time the husband and lover whom she could not forget, despite her dignity and in the face of all etiquette ran on foot to the monastery to bid him a final farewell. But Michael was eager to die in peace, and he coldly refused to receive the woman who had loved and lost him. Soon afterwards he passed away.

IV

For some time past the eunuch John had foreseen this event and had taken the necessary steps. The death of Michael IV, by necessarily restoring to Zoë the fullness and the free exercise of imperial power, would certainly be the ruin of all the hopes that this exceedingly ambitious man had formed for his relatives. He had therefore suggested that his brother should associate with him in his lifetime one of their nephews, likewise named Michael, and take advantage of Zoë's popularity to give the upstart a legal investiture and smooth his path to power. It had therefore been suggested to the aged Empress to

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

adopt this young man; and, strangely enough, in spite of the insults to which she had been subjected, Zoë had been only too delighted to comply with her husband's wishes. In the Church of Blachernae, in the presence of the assembled people, she had solemnly declared before the holy altars that she took her husband's nephew to be her son; after which the new Prince Imperial had received the title of Caesar and the rank of heir apparent.

Like all his family, Michael V was of very humble origin. His father had even been a caulker in the port, and that is why the inhabitants of the capital, always ready for a jest, soon gave the young Caesar the nickname of Michael Calaphates, or the Caulker. He himself was an unpleasant sort of person, bad, ungrateful, untruthful, with a private grudge against all his benefactors. His uncle, the Emperor Michael, who knew him well, cared very little for him, and, notwithstanding that he had brought him to the steps of the throne, excluded him from affairs of state and from the court. His uncle, the eunuch John, though his nephew professed great respect for him, likewise regarded him with distrust. He was destined amply to justify all the misgivings that he inspired.

The power was transmitted peacefully, however, when Michael IV died. Zoë, weak of character and old, was "very easily led", as Psellus puts it, and did whatever she was asked. Her former enemy and persecutor, the eunuch John, had only to shew her great respect; he threw himself at her feet and said that without her the State was powerless; he swore that, if her adopted son were to ascend the throne, he would be Emperor only in name, and

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

that all the actual power would be in her hands. She was fascinated by this clever comedy and enchanted at the unexpected compliments and at the influence that she enjoyed once more; and therefore she characteristically consented to everything. Michael V was proclaimed Basileus.

The new Emperor repaid ill all who had helped him rise. He began by getting rid of his uncle John, and gave his place as Prime Minister, together with the title of Nobilissimus, to another of his uncles, Constantine. Then he decided that Zoë was in the way. Like Michael IV, he too at first had shewn great respect to his adoptive mother; "She is my Empress," he used to say in speaking of her; "she is my sovereign. I am wholly devoted to her." But soon he thrust her aside; he diminished her allowance, refused her the honours due to her rank, and kept her in the Gynaecium under strict guard, taking away her women and openly ridiculing her. His companions kept telling him that he had better dethrone the aged Princess if he did not wish to suffer the fate of his predecessors. Michael thought himself strong enough to carry out the scheme; he imagined that he was popular in the capital — had not the people at the recent Easter festivities welcomed him in the streets with such unbounded enthusiasm that the road beneath his horses' hoofs was spread with priceless rugs? Believing in his star, proud of what he was daring to undertake scorning all advice, on the 18th of April, 1042, he determined to turn his benefactress out.

On Sunday night, Zoë was arrested in her apartments on the pretext that she had tried to poison

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

the Emperor; and notwithstanding her cries and protests was put hastily, with only one servant, aboard a vessel and taken to the neighbouring island of Prinkipo. Upon her arrival there she was shut up by the Basileus's orders in a convent, and forced to wear the habit of a nun, and her long grey hair was cut off and carried to Michael as evidence that his wishes had been executed. Having thus got rid of the Empress and believing her for ever dead to the world, the Emperor convoked the Senate and solemnly pronounced her dethroned. But he had not counted upon the traditional devotion of the people to the Macedonian house. As soon as the news spread through the city there was great disturbance; everywhere there were sorrowful faces, angry looks, anxious talk, and stormy gatherings, which the guard-soldiers had great difficulty in dispersing. The women, in particular, shewed intense excitement, and filled the streets with their cries. Moreover, when the Praefect of the City appeared in the Forum of Constantine to read the imperial proclamation announcing the event, he had hardly finished before a voice cried out, bluntly: "We don't want the Caulker to be our Emperor! We want the lawful heiress, our mother Zoë!" At these words there went up a great shout: "Death to the Caulker!" The revolution had broken out.

The people armed themselves in haste with anything that came handy, and the mob went surging through the city. Prisons were broken open and houses burnt or pillaged. Soon the Palace was attacked. On the advice of his uncle Constantine, who with the people of his household had bravely

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

come to the aid of the Basileus and had organised the defence, Michael decided to make a concession to the rioters. Zoë was hurriedly brought from her convent to the Sacred Palace, in dire apprehension as to her fate. In the greatest haste, without giving her time even to remove her religious habit, she was taken to the imperial box in the Hippodrome, where she and Michael appeared before the rebellious mob. The excitement of the people on beholding the Empress despoiled of the imperial robes, far from diminishing, grew more intense. In vain the Emperor tried to address the rebels; he was answered by insults and stones, and returning with the aged Princess to the Palace the wretch thought only of flight, until his uncle Constantine inspired him with fresh courage and prevailed upon him to resist.

Meanwhile, in St. Sophia, an unexpected occurrence had infused new strength into the revolt.

Zoë, as we have seen, had a sister, Theodora. Although she had been associated in the Empire since the death of Constantine VIII, this Princess, in spite of occupying a somewhat less exalted position than her elder sister, soon became a nuisance to the latter, who detested her. She was at first kept in the Palace under secret surveillance; later she was accused of conspiring against established authority, and on this pretext was sent away from court and banished to the convent of the Petriou. Then, a few months afterwards, on the ground that otherwise it would be impossible, as a chronicler says, to put an end "to intrigues and scandals", Zoë went in person to the convent and in her own presence had Theodora's hair cut off. The Princess's public life

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

was to all appearances over. She seems to have accustomed herself without much difficulty to her lot, satisfied with the external honours that the Emperor Romanus, her brother-in-law, permitted her out of kindness to retain; and in her cloister she was gradually forgotten. Michael IV treated her as he had treated Zoë — that is to say, badly enough. As for Michael V, he does not seem even to have suspected that, apart from Zoë, there was left any lawful descendant of Constantine VIII, and he would have been put to it for an answer had he been asked whether Theodora was alive or dead.

The revolution of 1042 suddenly restored this forgotten nun to the highest rank. When Michael V overthrew his benefactress, the insurgents, in casting around for a legitimate heir with which to oppose the usurper, remembered Theodora. She had retained some friends, furthermore, among her father's former servants and even in the Senate. These politicians realised that the dotting, volatile Zoë was quite capable, once restored to power, of receiving again into full favour the man who had dethroned her; and they felt it necessary, if the revolution were fully to accomplish its end, to associate a more energetic Empress with the old, indulgent Basilissa. They therefore hurried to the convent of the Petrion and offered the Empire to the nun, and, when she hesitated and resisted, the mob carried her off almost by force. The imperial mantle was thrown over her shoulders; she was lifted upon a horse, and, surrounded by drawn swords, amid the cheers of the populace, was taken across the city to St. Sophia. The Patriarch, who was devotedly

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

attached to the Macedonian house, awaited her there in order to proclaim her. The rioters now had an Empress.

This was on Monday evening. The first act of the new government that had been formed in the Great Church was to proclaim the dethronement of Michael V and to appoint a new Praefect of the City. But so long as the Palace held out, all was still to win. During the whole of Tuesday fighting went on around the imperial residence, and in the bloody assaults upon it more than three thousand were killed. But at evening the besiegers managed to break in the doors, and, while the mob stopped to pillage, the Emperor with his uncle the Nobilissimus and some friends had time to jump into a boat and make their way by sea to the venerated monastery of the Studion. There the defeated Basileus and his minister assumed the monastic habit, hoping thus to save their lives.

The victorious populace were wild with joy. "Some" says Psellus in a curious passage, "made offerings to God, while others cheered the Empress; the people of the lower classes gathered in groups in the public squares, dancing, and singing ballads about the recent events." Zoë, whom Michael V before his flight had set at liberty, and who had immediately resumed the power in the Palace, was no less happy, and quite ready in consequence to grant free pardons. But, in St. Sophia, the people of Theodora's following were less inclined to leniency; and the multitude, who had already forced Zoë to recognise her sister as colleague, now clamoured for the execution of the guilty ones. Zoë tried in vain to persuade the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

Senate to be merciful; in vain, from a balcony of the Palace, she addressed the people and thanked them. When she went on to speak of the overthrown Emperor, and asked what should be done to him, a universal cry went up: "Death to the scoundrel, the villain! Impale him! Crucify him! Blind him!"

While Zoë hesitated, Theodora, confident of her popularity, acted. By her orders the Praefect of the City dragged the dethroned Emperor and the Nobilissimus, amid the jeers of the mob, from the Studion, where they had sought sanctuary, and outside in the street, under the eyes of the spectators, who ravened "like wild beasts" against their victims, had them blinded. Afterwards they were exiled. The revolution was over.

In this crisis it was Theodora who, by her intervention, her energy, and her decision, had really saved the situation, and, as Psellus says, "overthrown the tyranny." In spite of herself, therefore, Zoë had to share the fruits of victory with her sister. Indeed, rather than have this detested colleague, she would have preferred anyone else; she would sooner have seen, says Psellus energetically, a stable-boy on the throne than Theodora; and that was why she had tried as hard to save Michael V as Theodora's followers to be revenged upon him. But Zoë had no choice. The Senate and people pronounced in favour of her sister, and she yielded. She had a reconciliation with Theodora, threw her arms around her, offered her half of the power, and had her brought in great state from St. Sophia to the Sacred Palace. Theodora, with her usual modesty, accepted the imperial dignity only on condition that her elder sister should

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

have first place; and now was seen an extraordinary state of affairs, unknown hitherto in Byzantium; namely, the Gynaecium becoming the official centre of public affairs, and the Empire governed by two old women. And, what is even more extraordinary, these two old women made themselves obeyed.

Seldom, however, have two near relatives been more unlike, both physically and intellectually, than these sisters. Whereas Zoë was pretty, well-proportioned, and elegant, Theodora, though rather younger, was ill-favoured; she was ugly, and her overlong body was wholly disproportionate to her very small head. Whereas Zoë was lively, violent, and flighty, Theodora was dignified, calm, and slow to decide. Zoë threw money away by the handful, was wasteful, extravagant, and ridiculously generous. Theodora kept track of expenditures; she was very economical — possibly because before coming to the throne she had never had much to spend — and loved to store up her wealth in great strongboxes; and, having no taste for luxuries, nor being of a generous disposition, she spent little on herself, and even less on others. Whereas Zoë was eager and passionate, Theodora was chaste, proper, and irreproachable, and had always energetically refused to marry. She was a worthy creature, on the whole, amiable, kindly disposed, reserved, unassertive, and modest, and seemed made to fill the minor parts which fitted her so well. One quality, however, she had: she was a good speaker and liked to exercise her gift; and she was also, as we have seen, capable of occasional bursts of energy. Taken all in all, she, like Zoë, was mediocre, without very much char-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

acter, and incapable of sustained effort. But, in spite of their common mediocrity, the sisters were too dissimilar to care greatly for one another or to get on well together for long.

Psellus has drawn a very curious picture of the court at this period. Every day, in accordance with etiquette, the two Empresses came in state costume and took their places side by side on the throne of the Basileis. Near them stood their councillors, and around them in a double circle were ranged the ushers, the sword-bearers, and the Varangians carrying the heavy double-edged ax, all with eyes lowered out of respect for the sex of their sovereigns. The two Princesses gave judgement, received ambassadors, and dealt with affairs of State, giving at times an order or an answer in low tones, and even venturing occasionally to express their own wishes. And civilians and soldiers gave obedience to these gentle, tactful women.

But since, on the whole, they were both rather incompetent, this régime could not be of long duration. The luxury of the court — for now, as by a swift change of scene, each vied with the other in magnificence — and Zoë's absurd prodigality, soon emptied the treasury. Money was scarce, loyalty grew slack, and the need of a strong man was imperatively felt. Furthermore the close association of the hostile sisters was becoming embarrassing, and the court was divided into two parties. Zoë could think of but one way to end the situation; namely, by making a third marriage. She was at that time sixty-four years of age.

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

V

Having made up her mind — and, strange as it may seem, everyone encouraged her —, the old Empress set about to find a husband. At first she considered Constantine Dalassenus, to whom Constantine VIII had once wished to marry her. But this great and ambitious noble, who had been suspected several times of revolutionary designs, did not evince the tact and deference proper in a Prince Consort. He spoke out frankly, stated his conditions, and announced sweeping reforms and strong and vigorous resolves. This was not the sort of Emperor that the Palace was seeking, and so he was sent back to his province. Zoë next thought of another of her former favourites, the High Steward Constantine, who had been driven by the jealousy of Michael IV from Constantinople. From the point of view of personality he would have been just the man; but unfortunately, like Romanus Argyrus before him, he was married, and his wife was less accommodating than Romanus's. Rather than surrender her husband to another, she preferred to poison him.

At last, after several fruitless attempts, the Basilissa recalled to mind still another of her former friends, Constantine Monomachus. As a relative by marriage of Romanus III he had, some twelve or thirteen years back, cut an important figure at court, and by his beauty, his elegance, his fair speech, and his talent for amusing the Empress, had so captivated Zoë that there had been much gossip about them. Michael IV indeed, immediately after his accession,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

had taken the precaution of exiling this compromising friend. But Zoë had never forgotten him. She had seized the opportunity afforded by the revolution of 1042 to end his disgrace, and had appointed him governor of Greece. She now proposed to exalt him still further, and, as her choice was very acceptable to the court, where everyone was most eager for her to marry, she decided on him.

One of the Augusta's chamberlains was selected to carry to the new favourite the imperial insignia, the symbol and pledge of his high destiny, and to bring him back without delay to Constantinople. On the 11th of June, 1042, he made his solemn entry, amid the shouts of the enthusiastic multitude, after which the marriage took place with great splendour at the Palace. And although the Patriarch felt himself unable personally to solemnise a third marriage that the Greek Church condemned (Zoë, as we have seen, was twice a widow, and Constantine had also been married twice), a Byzantine prelate was usually too much a courtier and too thorough a politician long to withstand the powers that be. "Yielding to circumstances," says Psellus maliciously, "or, rather, to the will of God", after the ceremony he cordially embraced the newly-wedded pair. "Was that a truly canonical act?" inquires the writer, ironically, "or was it flattery pure and simple? How can I tell?" Whichever it was, Byzantium had an Emperor.

In appearance the new sovereign fully justified the Empress's choice. He was a very handsome man. "As handsome as Achilles" says Psellus. "He was a finished work of Nature." His face was attractive; he had a clear skin, delicate features, and a delightful

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

smile, and his whole personality irradiated charm. He was admirably proportioned, with a fine and graceful figure and beautiful, delicate hands. But remarkable vigour lay hidden, nevertheless, under this somewhat effeminate exterior. Accustomed to every kind of bodily exercise, an accomplished horseman, an excellent runner, a good fighter, Constantine had large reserves of hidden force. Those whom it amused him to squeeze in his arms felt the effects for several days, and there was no object too hard for him to break with his slender, well-kept hands.

He was a man of great fascination and charm. His voice was soft and he was a good speaker. Of a naturally amiable disposition, he was always in good spirits, ever smiling and ready to seek enjoyment for himself and others. He was essentially a good fellow, neither haughty nor vain, unaffected, without rancour, and eager to please everyone. And he had other qualities as well. Although quick to anger, so that he reddened on the slightest provocation, he had learned to control himself perfectly, and, as he was always master of himself, he was just, humane, and benevolent, and granted pardon even to those who conspired against him. "I have never seen" says Psellus, "a more sympathetic person." He was generous to the point of prodigality, and said repeatedly, somewhat like Titus, that a day on which he had not performed a humane or generous act was a day lost. As a matter of fact, his indulgence to others bordered upon weakness, for in order to please his favourites he was in the habit of distributing the highest offices of State among them in

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

the most casual way. Owing to his great desire to make everyone happy and contented, his generosity often amounted to wastefulness. He was unable to refuse anything, whether to his wife or to his mistresses; he was always open-handed, and ever ready for amusement, and he often remarked that it was the duty of all loyal subjects to participate in the pleasures of the court.

Constantine, without being a particularly learned man, was intelligent. He was quick-witted and enjoyed the society of men of letters. Among his associates were such scholars as Constantine Lichudes, Xiphilin, John Mauropus, and Psellus; it was on their advice that he reopened the University of Constantinople and added to it a law school so as to insure the proper training of men for the government service. He went even further, and, instead of assigning office according to the birth of the candidates, instituted the merit-system. In order to make this reform effective, he promoted his friends the scholars to high office — Lichudes became Prime Minister; Psellus, Lord Chamberlain and Secretary of State; Xiphilin, Chancellor; Mauropus, Privy Councillor. All this made Constantine very popular. Furthermore he was brave. This virtue was, perhaps, in his case a result of the somewhat fatalistic indifference which he acknowledged openly and which induced him to dispense, even at night-time, with a guard at the door of his private apartments. But from whatever source derived, his courage was undoubted, and was manifested on many occasions. And if we consider that on the whole during the reign of Constantine Monomachus the Byzantine

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

Empire, more than once victorious and usually at peace, preserved all its former prestige, we may perhaps come to the conclusion that this monarch was by no means so bad a sovereign as his detractors later asserted.

Unfortunately, his undoubted qualities were balanced by grave defects. Monomachus loved pleasure, women, and an easy, luxurious life. Having attained the throne by a stroke of luck, he regarded his position as essentially a means of satisfying his fancies. "After escaping a violent storm," says Psellus prettily, "he had reached the pleasant coast and secure haven of royalty, and was not anxious to put out again to sea." He bothered himself but little about public affairs, and left them to his ministers. The throne was to him, as Psellus says, only "a rest after struggle and a realisation of desire." In the words of a modern historian: "To a government of women there succeeded the government of a high liver and a hedonist." ¹

Constantine was a man of very amorous temperament, and had always delighted in gallant adventures, several of which before his accession had been rather notorious. He had been twice married and twice widowed, and had found consolation in his love for a young girl, the niece of the second wife, a member of the illustrious house of Sclerus, and known as Sclerena. She was pretty and intelligent. Psellus, who knew her, has left a very attractive account of her: "It was not that she was a flawless beauty; but her conversation was pleasant because it was free from malice and slander. She was sweet and gracious

¹ A. N. Rambaud, *Michel Psellos* (*Revue historique*, tome iii, 1877.)

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

enough to have melted a rock. She had a wonderful voice, and a melodious and almost oratorical manner of speaking; her tongue was endowed with a native charm, and when she spoke, it was with indescribable grace. She loved" adds the man of letters, "to ask me questions about Greek mythology, and she introduced into her conversation what she had learnt from scholars. To a greater degree than any other woman she possessed the gift of listening." ¹

She pleased not only Psellus, but everybody. The first time that she took part in the imperial procession, a courtier both witty and educated greeted her with a neat and delicate compliment, quoting the two first words of the beautiful passage in Homer where the old men of Troy, seated on the walls, remark at the sight of Helen passing by in all her radiant beauty:

Nor Greeks nor Trojans one can rightly blame
That, for a woman's sake so beautiful
They have alike endured so many woes.

The allusion was ingenious and flattering; everyone caught his meaning at once and applauded. And is not this proof of the singular refinement of Byzantine society in the eleventh century, a society which in some of its aspects seems to us so barbarous, yet which is shewn by this anecdote to have been so impregnated with the great memories of classical Greece, so endowed with acute intelligence, with literary taste, and with graceful and delicate thoughts?

At the beginning of his liaison with Sclerena, Constantine Monomachus would gladly have married

¹ This translation is taken from Rambaud's article previously cited.

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

her. But the Greek Church, as we have seen, was very unbending in the matter of third marriages, particularly when the parties were mere private persons; Constantine did not dare to flout its prohibitions. So she became his mistress and was the great passion of his life. The lovers were inseparable, even in misfortune. When Monomachus was exiled, Sclerena followed him to Lesbos, putting her entire fortune at his disposal, consoling him in his disgrace, rekindling his courage, holding out to him the hope of future vengeance, and telling him that one day he would become Emperor and that then they would be married and never part. Without regret or hesitation the lovely young woman spent seven years on that distant island; and naturally, when chance raised Constantine to the throne, he never forgot her who had loved him so well.

Even in Zoë's arms his thoughts were of Sclerena. He managed so cleverly that in spite of the Empress's notorious jealousy and in spite of the prudent advice of his friends and of his sister Euprepia, he was able to recall his mistress to Constantinople. From the very evening of his marriage he had spoken of her to Zoë, skilfully, of course, and with discretion, as a person to be treated with consideration on account of her family; soon he persuaded his wife to write inviting Sclerena to come to the Palace, assuring her at the same time of her goodwill. The young woman, who strongly suspected that the Basilissa did not care for her in the least, was not wholly convinced that this invitation was all it purported to be; but she adored Constantine, and so she returned. The Emperor immediately had a splendid palace erected

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

for his favourite, and every day, on pretence of watching the progress of the work, spent many hours with Sclerena. The people of his suite, who during these visits were given an abundance of food and drink, thoroughly approved of the meetings; and when, in the midst of the official ceremonies, the courtiers gathered from the sovereign's bored manner that he wanted to go to his mistress, they vied with one another to find ways for him to escape to his beloved.

Soon their connexion was openly avowed. The Emperor provided Sclerena with a household and a guard and made her wonderful presents: he sent her, for example, on one occasion an enormous bronze cup, beautifully engraved and filled to the brim with jewels. Every day he made her a new present, for which he emptied the Treasury. At last he treated her as his recognised and lawful wife. In the Palace she had her apartments, to which Constantine resorted freely at any hour, and she received the title of Sebaste, which gave her rank immediately after the two aged Empresses.

Zoë, contrary to the general expectation, took the affair very philosophically. "She had reached an age" Psellus indiscreetly remarks, "at which one is no longer very sensitive to wrongs of this nature." She was growing old, and was changing considerably in the process. She cared no longer for dress, had ceased to be jealous, and in her old age was turning pious. She spent many hours now at the feet of the holy images, enfolding them in her arms, talking to them, calling them by the most endearing names; dissolved in tears, she rolled before the icons in an

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

ecstasy of mystical passion, giving to God what remained of the love that she had so lavished upon others. Therefore she consented without much difficulty to the most extraordinary arrangements. She gave Constantine his liberty, authorising him to cease all intimate relations with her; and an official document to this effect, called the Contract of Friendship was signed by husband and wife and duly registered by the Senate of the Empire. Sclerena had a recognised position at court, figured in the official processions, and was addressed by the titles of Sovereign and Basilissa. Zoë looked on delighted and smiling; she kissed her rival affectionately, and between his two wives Constantine Monomachus was a happy man. For the convenience of the household a delightful arrangement was arrived at. The imperial apartments were divided into three sections. The Emperor occupied the central part, while Zoë and Sclerena took those to right and left respectively. By tacit agreement Zoë in future never visited the Basileus except when Sclerena was not with him and she could be sure of finding him alone. And this tactful contrivance seemed to everyone a miracle of ingenuity.

The people of the capital alone looked unfavourably upon this curious association. One day, when Constantine was going to the Church of the Holy Apostles, a voice from the crowd called out as the Emperor was leaving the Palace: "We don't want Sclerena for Empress! We don't want our mothers Zoë and Theodora put to death on her account!" The multitude joined in and a tumult arose; and, had not the aged Porphyrogenitae shewed themselves

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

on a balcony of the Palace and calmed the people, Monomachus might well have lost his life.

To the day of her death Constantine remained faithful to Sclerena. When a sudden illness carried her off, he was inconsolable. Weeping like a child, he made public manifestation of his grief, had her buried with great magnificence, and built her a splendid tomb. Then, being a man, he cast about for other mistresses. After several passing fancies he fell in love with a little Alan princess living as a hostage at the Byzantine court. She does not seem to have been very pretty; but she had what in Psellus's judgement were two great points, a very white skin and wonderful eyes. As soon as the Emperor became aware of the existence of this young barbarian, he gave up all his other conquests for her, and his passion grew so strong that, when Zoë died, after having publicly announced her as his mistress, he thought seriously of making her his lawful wife. However, he did not dare take the step for fear of the thunders of the Church and the reproaches of his sister-in-law, the straight-laced Theodora. But at least he bestowed on his favourite the title of Sebaste, as he had formerly done on Sclerena; he surrounded her with imperial pomp and circumstance, and showered her with jewels and gold. And the little Circassian might be seen, her head and throat covered with gold, golden serpents around her arms, great pearls in her ears, a girdle of gold and jewels about her small waist, presiding like a typical harem beauty over all the Palace festivities. For her and for her parents, who came every year from distant Alania to pay her a visit, the Basileus squandered

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

whatever sums remained in the Treasury, and he presented her to everyone as his wife and the lawful Empress. She was destined, moreover, greatly to sadden the last days of the sovereign who was so infatuated with her charms.

VI

Thus, towards the middle of the eleventh century, during the reign of Constantine Monomachus and Zoë, the Byzantine court presented a very curious appearance.

In leading the life he loved the Emperor soon exhausted his vitality. He was no longer the handsome, elegant, robust Monomachus of former days. He suffered much from stomach-trouble, but chiefly from gout. The attacks were so violent that his twisted, deformed hands could not hold anything, and his tortured, swollen feet were unable to support him. Sometimes at audiences he was incapable of standing; on such occasions he received stretched upon a bed. But even this position soon became intolerable, and his servants had constantly to shift him from one side to another. Frequently even talking caused him pain. But his appearance was particularly distressing when he was obliged to take part in official processions. He had himself lifted upon a horse, and he set forth between two sturdy attendants who kept him from falling off. All along the way stones were carefully removed to save him from sharp, painful shocks; and thus the Basileus proceeded, his face distorted, gasping for breath, letting drop the reins that he was no longer able

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

to hold. It must be put to Constantine's credit that he bore his troubles bravely, always smiling, always jovial. He used to say in jest that God must have afflicted him thus in order to curb his too fiery passions; and he diverted himself with philosophical reflections upon his sufferings. Moreover, as soon as he felt better, he denied himself neither his pleasures nor his mistresses.

Close by the sovereign lived the two old Porphyrogenitae, whose intellects age had somewhat weakened. Zoë spent her time in making perfumes, shutting herself up summer and winter alike in her over-heated rooms, and never tearing herself away from her favourite occupation except to burn incense before her beloved images and to question them about the future; while Theodora counted over and over again the money that she had stored away, taking little interest in other matters, a chaste and sanctimonious virgin. Around them revolved the acknowledged mistresses, Sclerena, the little Alan princess, and others, courtiers and favourites — often people of low origin — with whom the Emperor was infatuated and whom he raised to the highest offices in the State. And all these gentry had an excessively good time and did their best to amuse the Basileus.

For Constantine loved gaiety. Anyone who wished to command his attention in some important matter found that the best and indeed the only way to get him to listen was to begin with an amusing remark. Serious looks frightened him; but a clown could win his favour in a minute. He was, in fact, diverted chiefly by broad jests, heavy practical jokes, and

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

extravagant puns. Music, singing, and dancing, bored him; he preferred amusements of a different nature and often in questionable taste. Psellus relates some of these pleasantries; and it must be admitted that, however entertaining they may have been in the eleventh century, to-day they seem very feeble. For example, one of the Emperor's greatest delights was to hear someone stammer and exhaust himself in vain attempts to enunciate distinctly. The story is told of a courtier who achieved an enormous success in the Palace by imitating perfectly an affliction of this kind and relapsing gradually into inarticulate cries and distressing stutters. His pleasing talent so enraptured Constantine that he became the sovereign's prime favourite, and was henceforth in the habit of visiting the Emperor without ceremony at any time, holding his hands, kissing him on the mouth, sitting down laughing beside him on his bed, and sometimes going to him even at night to wake him up and tell him some more or less amusing tale, usually taking the opportunity of extracting from him some favour or gift.

As he was free to go wherever he liked, the buffoon intruded even into the Imperial Gynaecium, and amused the court intensely with the stories that he told there. He invented tales about the virtuous Theodora herself, saying that she had had children, relating the affair with many obscene details, and ending by mimicking the Princess's imaginary *accouchements*, imitating her groans and the wails of the new-born child, and putting into the aged and respectable sovereign's mouth all sorts of improper remarks. Everyone was convulsed with laughter,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

even Theodora herself, and this fellow became the hero of the Gynaecium. Only the sober-minded were somewhat pained, but like good courtiers followed where the others led. "We were obliged to laugh," says Psellus bitterly, "though there was better cause to weep."

Relying on the universal indulgence, this extraordinary favourite became bolder. He fell in love with the young Alan princess, and, as he was an amusing fellow, seems to have made a conquest of the little barbarian. But his head was turned by his good fortune, and, being really seriously infatuated, he conceived the idea, in a burst of jealousy, of assassinating the Emperor, his rival, and taking his place. One evening he was discovered, dagger in hand, at the door of Monomachus's bedchamber. He was promptly arrested, and the next day was brought to trial before a court of justice presided over by the Basileus. But now we come to the amusing part of the story. When Constantine beheld his dear friend in chains, his weak indulgence overcame him and his eyes filled with tears. "For goodness' sake, free the man," he exclaimed, "it distresses me to see him in that condition." Then he gently asked the prisoner to be frank, and say what had impelled him to crime. The fellow answered that it was owing to an overpowering desire to wear the imperial insignia and to sit upon the throne of the Basileis. At this, Constantine burst into laughter and immediately gave orders that his fancy should be indulged. Then, turning to his favourite he said: "Now I am going to put the diadem on your head and clothe you in the purple. I ask of you nothing in return but to be your

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

own agreeable self for the future." At this all present, even the judges, were unable to retain their gravity, and a great banquet sealed the Emperor's reconciliation with his friend.

The man was encouraged by the indulgence shewn him, and naturally continued his attempts upon the sovereign's mistress. In the presence of the entire court and even under the Emperor's very nose he smiled and made signs to her. But Constantine merely laughed at such conduct. "Just look at the poor creature!" said he to Psellus. "He is still in love, and his past misfortunes have not taught him a lesson." He himself was a "poor creature" after Molière's heart.

Whilst the frivolous Emperor wasted his time in these idiocies — the expression is Psellus's —, whilst he squandered the revenues of the State in absurd prodigality, in magnificent buildings, and in childish and ruinous caprices, neglecting the army, begrudging the men their pay, and reducing the strength, the most serious events were in preparation. Two storms were already looming over the horizon and were soon to burst upon the Empire — the Normans in the West and the Turks in the East. Within the monarchy, the discontent of the military party, weary of the weakness of the civil authority and irritated at the disgrace of its most illustrious generals, was manifesting itself in dangerous leanings towards revolutionary pronunciamientos. And, taking advantage of the heedlessness of Monomachus, an ambitious Patriarch, Michael Cerularius, was completing the separation between Byzantium and Rome.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

VII

In 1050, at the age of seventy-two, the long and tumultuous life of Zoë Porphyrogenita came to an end. Constantine Monomachus, her husband, who for eight years, as we have seen, had been sufficiently detached from her, felt that he had done his duty in mourning her conscientiously. He even tried to find a place for her among the saints, and did his best to detect the performance of all kinds of miracles at her tomb, so as to prove to everyone that her soul was with the angels. This was doing a great deal of honour to a sensual and passionate old woman who had so disturbed the court and the capital with her scandalous marriages and love-affairs. Monomachus, however, did not insist very strongly upon this attempted beatification; he soon consoled himself, as we have seen, and found Zoë's death an auspicious occasion for announcing his most recent favourite. Furthermore, he died a few years later, on the 11th of January, 1055, in the monastery of St. George of Mangana which he had founded, and to which he had retired towards the end of his life.

Now, for the last time, Theodora, Zoë's sister, appears upon the scene. After Zoë's third marriage Theodora had lived at court, nominally associated in the Empire, but playing in fact a very unimportant part. At the most, since the Empress's death, she had acquired a little more influence, and her brother-in-law, Monomachus, seems to have stood in terror of the old lady's lectures. But this last descendant of the Macedonian dynasty appeared, nevertheless, to count for so little that Monomachus,

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

regardless of her undoubted rights to the throne, had considered nominating another as his successor. Then it was that once again there stirred in Theodora's veins the fiery blood and the proud energy of the great Emperors her ancestors. While Constantine Monomachus lay dying, she resolutely took possession of the Great Palace, strong in her right of birth and in the prestige which the sufferings of her long life had given her among the people. The guard-regiments pronounced in her favour and the Senate followed their lead. Thus at the age of seventy the old Princess firmly seized the power.

Warned by her sister's example and knowing how little a Basilissa could count on the gratitude of the men whom she associated with her, Theodora to the general amazement refused to take a husband. She insisted upon governing alone, and, as she was sensible enough to allow herself to be guided by a capable minister, she seems to have governed well. Her green old age, furthermore, excited universal admiration. Her figure was straight and her mind alert; she was able to work seriously with her advisers and to make the long speeches in which she delighted. She gladly let her friends the monks persuade her that her days were destined to exceed the allotted span of human life.

But in the long run everyone in the capital and in the Empire tired of this feminine government that had lasted now for more than twenty-five years. The Patriarch Cerularius, who had become since the schism the Pope, as it were, of the Eastern Church, said openly that it was a shame that a woman should govern the Roman Empire. The military

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

party, discontented at the position that the bureaucracy occupied in the State, and exasperated at the insulting distrust with which the court regarded the generals, were growing restless. And many good citizens who, like Psellus, prided themselves on their patriotism, recalled the glorious days of Basil II and passed severe judgement on these Princesses whose ridiculous prodigality, childish vanity, fantastic caprices, and limited intelligence, had prepared the ruin of the monarchy and sown the germs of fatal decay in the healthy body of the Empire. Everyone wanted a man and a soldier. Theodora was fortunate enough to die before the storm burst. She passed away on the 31st of August, 1056.

With her came to an end the Macedonian house, founded two centuries earlier by that Basil whose adventures and ambitions I have already related. At the end of the ninth century the unscrupulous energy of this able man had rescued the monarchy from threatening decay and given Byzantium two centuries of glory and prosperity. In the middle of the eleventh century the death of his last descendant plunged the Empire once more into anarchy. But in the eleventh century as in the ninth this anarchy was of short duration. Once more there appeared a man who, by founding the Comnenian dynasty, gave the Byzantine State another century of splendour. Thus, at every crisis, Byzantium always found a saviour; to each of these periods of apparent decline there succeeded an unlooked-for renascence, wherein, to quote a chronicler, "that old dame, the Empire, appears like a young girl,

ZOË PORPHYROGENITA

adorned with gold and precious stones." Such revolutions of fortune may perhaps surprise those who see in Byzantine history only the corruptions of court life and the tumults of the capital. It is necessary, therefore, to insist that, vivid and picturesque though their story may be, Constantinople and the Sacred Palace do not constitute the whole Empire.

Beyond court intrigues and conspiracies, beyond military insurrections and civil discords, beyond the scandalous and childish caprices of these depraved Emperors and degenerate Empresses, beyond this corrupt world of courtiers and persons bent upon pleasure or upon ambition, there are reserve-forces of strength and energy which long remained inexhaustible in the middle classes of the great cities, in the powerful feudal and military aristocracy of the provinces, among the rough peasants of Macedonia and of Anatolia. It is to these middle classes that the Byzantine Empire at so many turning-points in its history owed its unexpected salvation; it was because of them and their virile virtues that the Byzantine monarchy was able to exist for so many centuries; and therefore it is to them that we must turn if we wish really to understand that little-studied Byzantine society. It is a deplorable fact that there have survived only very few manuscripts from which we are able to reconstruct their history with any degree of certainty. Some, however, do exist; and it is on them that the concluding chapters in this volume are based.

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY OF
THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

THE woman whose portrait I shall now attempt to draw differs in two essentials from the commonly-depicted types of Byzantine women: she belonged to the middle classes, and she was respectable. If to the observer she is consequently somewhat less picturesque and amusing than such persons as Theophano, Zoë, and their like, she may perhaps give one a better idea of the times in which she lived than do these great ladies of exceptional behaviour. Her name was Theodota and she was the mother of Michael Psellus, whose eminent qualities I have already described¹; and she is very well known to us, thanks to a curious little work, the funeral oration composed in her memory by her devoted son.² She played no part, to be sure, in the events of the century in which she lived; nothing could be more even, more calm, more sober, and in some ways more commonplace, than her life; and it is precisely for this reason that she is of especial interest to us. With her aid we shall penetrate a little way into the intimate, domestic life of that vanished society; and her portrait will thus have a

¹ See Chapter X.

² The text was published in 1876 by Sathas in volume V of his *Bibliotheca graeca Medii Aevi*.

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

kind of representative value. For she is, as it were, typical of those thousands of Byzantine middle-class women, her contemporaries, who, like her, never moved in the full blaze of history, but who, like her again, were honest women living pious, humble, respectable lives; and in this way she affords us an admirable opportunity of becoming acquainted with the occupations, cares, and pleasures of a middle-class Byzantine family of the eleventh century.

I

Theodota was born in Constantinople towards the end of the tenth century of sober, plain, and honest parents. She was the eldest of several children, and in the closely united circle in which she grew up seems to have been greatly admired and loved. As a child she was extremely beautiful; in her girlhood she was charming, and though her circumstances and tastes never permitted her to indulge in fine raiment, her graceful figure, her beautiful hair, her radiant complexion, and the splendour of her wonderful eyes, awoke the admiration of all who met her. "She was like a rose that has no need of borrowed beauty" says Psellus in the little book that I have mentioned.

Her character was compounded of common sense, energy, and firmness — qualities apparent even in her quiet, sedate manner of speech. Like other young girls of her condition, she had been educated at home, which, according to the custom of the period, meant that she had learnt little enough. She was taught feminine accomplishments: spinning,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

embroidery, and weaving; to them were added the rudiments of letters, which she worked at by herself to develop. And being an intelligent woman she may perhaps have yearned for more, regretting at times that she was not a man, and that her sex forbade her to go to school and listen to the conversation of the learned. She was pious and went often to church, cherishing already in her pure young soul a deep, mystical devotion. In spite of the conquests her beauty made, she seems to have been little inclined to marriage, and lent an unwilling ear to the constant suggestions of her family. At last her father, when he had exhausted all his eloquence in vain, became angry and threatened Theodota with his curse if she did not choose a husband. She gave in, and from among her eager suitors accepted Psellus's future father.

He was a man of good birth who prided himself on having patricians and consuls among his ancestors; but he was a gentleman of slender fortune. Luckily for his family, our western aristocratic prejudices were unknown in Byzantium; this patrician was not ashamed to work for his living, and had taken to commerce in order to support them. In appearance he was handsome, well set-up, straight and tall "as a well-grown cypress"; he had bright, laughing eyes under clearly-pencilled eyebrows; an engaging and gracious expression pervaded his countenance. In character he was simple and honest, of a calm and even disposition; he never became angry and never struck anyone. He was active and industrious, and liked to do things himself. He was not, to be sure, "very ready of speech"; but when necessary he could

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

speak acceptably. In short, he was a simple soul, an agreeable, commonplace sort of fellow. "The mere sight of him," says Psellus, "even before hearing him speak, would have persuaded men who pride themselves on a knowledge of physiognomy that he preserved in our century a spark, as it were, of the classic simplicity." This modest man was never the subject of much talk. "He went through life" to quote his son's charming phrase, "lightly, without making a false step, at an even pace, like oil flowing noiselessly."

His wife was a different sort of person. She had all the strong qualities that were lacking in her husband. He was timid and somewhat apathetic, whereas she had a double share of energy and initiative, and was really the man of the family. "Providence bestowed her upon my father" says Psellus, "not merely as a helper and collaborator, but as a commander, a guide who took the initiative in all matters of importance." But Theodota was tactful, and took care that her weak husband should not perceive the great influence she exercised over him. She preferred to treat this good creature, who never terrified anyone, with the greatest respect; she spoke to him as if she were an inferior, pretending to consult and obey him in everything, "less from consideration of his sensibilities" writes Psellus with a touch of irreverence, "than from respect for the ancient traditions of the family."

She made him, at all events, perfectly happy. Gay, smiling, always sweet and amiable, she was a wonderful housekeeper, ruling her home wisely and making it prosper, supervising the servants,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

performing the usual tasks, and seeing to the petty details of the life of the gynaeceum. But she had still higher qualities. Since she was sensible, calm, reasonable, and possessed even of the critical faculty, she was able to converse with decorum and to keep quiet when necessary. She knew how to comport herself and how to impose her wishes. "She was much more resolute than her husband" — Psellus himself says so —, and had indeed "a virile soul." But, for all that, she was a true woman. She was reserved, modest, with a simple grace of manner, charming and kind to all about her. To her aged parents she was constantly and beautifully attentive, caring for them when they were ill, watching over and comforting them. To her children, as we shall see, she was a mother in a thousand. Although a pretty woman, she did not care for society. Costly fare, rich furniture, and splendid garments of vivid hues, made no appeal to her. Living only for her family, she took interest in very little else, knowing nothing of what went on in town and court, taking no part in the gossip of the neighbourhood, and ignorant even of the tumults and riots that disturbed the capital. "Not one of the women of her times" says her son, "could compare with her." She was a quiet, decent, middle-class woman, somewhat methodical and strict; and she inspired in all who came in contact with her, even in her own relatives, a kind of reverence. She was a superior being, and in her family was generally referred to as "the Living Law."

Theodota would hardly have been complete if she had not been charitable and pious. She loved to

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

entertain the poor at her table; but not so as to make a display of her generosity and humiliate the recipients. She knew how to give. She received her wretched guests in person, washed their feet, waited upon them herself "as if they were great lords", and served them food and drink with her own hands. By constant reading of Holy Writ, by steeping herself morning and night in fervent prayers, her soul winged its way to God in ecstatic devotion. She had always loved the monastic life, the rough serge rags of the recluses, the austerities of the hermits, and would have liked to "lead a life completely pure to the glory of the God of purity." But on this point her husband stood firm. "Separation from my wife" he declared, "would be worse even than separation from God." Theodota, being obliged to live in the world, found consolation in visiting monks and nuns, in sleeping like them on the ground, and in numerous self-imposed mortifications. And in the long run this enthusiastic piety might perhaps have plunged her into unfortunate excesses had she not like, the intelligent and sensible woman she was, found an all-absorbing occupation in loving and bringing up her children.

II

The first child of Theodota's marriage was a daughter. The second was likewise a daughter. She received a rather frosty welcome, we must admit, for the entire household had been hoping for a son. One was born at last in the year 1018, and this was Psellus. He had been eagerly longed for and the

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

subject of many fervent prayers to God; and so the infant Constantine, as he was baptized, began his life amid cries of joy and paeans of triumph. In him were centred all the hopes of his family; and his mother, who insisted on nursing him herself, cherished in secret the loftiest ambitions for her beloved son.

Theodota applied herself with great care to her children's education. "Unlike the majority of women," says Psellus, "she did not regard motherhood as an excuse to abandon her activities and lead a life of laziness. She was strengthened rather than weakened by it, and it served, in consequence, to order her life and thought more securely." She divided her attention between her daughters and her son, dealing gently or sternly with them as occasion demanded; and her children, regarding her as a model of all the virtues, repaid her with unbounded respect and admiration. Deep down in her heart, however, Theodota secretly preferred her son, for whom she had conceived so many brilliant and flattering hopes. But she was very careful not to shew him any particular favouritism, for this rather stern woman would have considered it a weakness if she had been too open with her affections. She worshipped him; but kept herself well in hand, fearing that, if she were too lax and tender towards him, he might become less filial and less obedient. But at night, when she thought he was fast asleep, she used to go softly and take him in her arms, kissing him on the mouth and saying to him: "My darling child, how I love you! and yet I mustn't kiss you too often." Needless to say, little Psellus on

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

these occasions was sleeping with one eye open, for it is he himself who has left us this charming picture of maternal affection.

Theodota directed her beloved son's education with the same sound common sense. She would not allow anyone but herself to mould his character, and she set herself from his infancy to make him a good, pious, sensible child. Nor would she allow anyone to tell him nursery-tales to put him to sleep, or fill his mind full of silly stories of monsters and devils. She told him, on the contrary, pious and edifying tales, such as the story of Isaac, led to sacrifice and perfectly submissive to his father's wishes; of Jacob, blessed by his father because of his obedience to his mother; of the Christ-child, subject to His parents in all things; and from these stories she drew a moral appropriate to the child's age. But she was even more interested in his intellectual upbringing.

Young Psellus was a sensible, industrious, and extraordinarily intelligent boy. While still a child he understood and remembered everything that was said in his presence, and he already loved work and study, preferring it to any kind of game. His mother, who had always had a taste for the things of the mind, was far from neglecting this auspicious propensity. When he was five years of age, she sent him to school, where his success was immediate and brilliant. But when he graduated from the elementary courses, at the age of eight, the more serious question arose whether or not he should continue his studies. His relatives and connexions, assembled in a kind of family council, were of the opinion that he should

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

be taught some useful profession, so that — since learning never fed a man — he might be provided with an easier and more certain means of livelihood. Theodota rebelled against this sensible, but prudently materialistic, advice, and the reasons with which she prevailed over her relatives are perfectly characteristic of the society of her time.

No people ever believed more strongly than the Byzantines in the prophetic value of dreams. Psellus himself, a man of great force of intellect, who absolutely disbelieved in astrology and refused to admit that “our lives may be governed by the movements of the heavenly bodies”, Psellus, who mercilessly makes fun of those who profess to be able to foretell the future, and who calls magical arts and formulae ridiculous humbug, even Psellus believed in dreams and in their prophetic quality. His contemporaries, by the same token, had not the slightest doubts on the subject. For so many dreams had come true. When the mother of Basil the Macedonian had seen issuing from her womb a golden tree that overshadowed the whole world, when the Prior of St. Diomed’s dreamt that the man sleeping before the door of his church was a future Emperor, had not history justified their dreams by setting the founder of the Macedonian dynasty on the throne? Had not many other upstarts who attained to supreme power learnt previously in dreams of their destined greatness? There existed a whole literature, of which a few curious specimens have been preserved, devoted to the interpretation of dreams and oracles. It is therefore easy to understand that Psellus’s mother, like the thorough Byzantine she

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

was, should have found in them guarantees of the brilliant career in store for her son.

She related her dreams to the family council. She had dreamt that a discussion was taking place in her presence concerning the child's future, and that, overcome by the reproofs of her relatives, she was on the point of yielding to their advice, when suddenly there appeared before her a holy man in the likeness of St. John Chrysostom, the saint of eloquence, who addressed her thus: "Woman, be not disturbed, devote thy son boldly to learning. I will watch over him like a master, and like a teacher I will fill him with knowledge." Another night she had dreamt that she was entering the Church of the Holy Apostles, most reverentially escorted by a crowd of strange people as if she were a lady of rank. When she had reached the iconostasis, she saw a beautiful lady advancing to meet her, who told her to wait an instant until she returned. This she did; and the lady, on coming back, said to two men who were with her: "Fulfil this woman's son with learning, for you see how she loves me." Then, looking at the two persons whom the lady was addressing, Theodota recognised them as the Apostles Peter and Paul, and their interlocutress as the Theotokos herself, the all-powerful Virgin, dear to every Byzantine heart. Such were the dreams of Psellus's mother. Before arguments like these the relatives, who were as superstitious as all their contemporaries, gave way. It was decided that the child should pursue his studies.

He succeeded admirably in them — at least, so he says. He learnt to spell, he knew the whole Iliad by

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

heart, and soon was able to expound its prosody and its tropes and to appreciate the beauty of the metaphors and the melody of the verse. He was likewise taught rhetoric and music. At this time he was ten or eleven years of age. His mother followed her precocious child's progress carefully, and, when he came home from school, made him repeat his lessons to her. "Oh mother!" writes Psellus, "not only were you wise in your advice, but you were my fellow-worker and my inspiration as well. You questioned me on what I had done at school, on what my teachers had taught me, on what I had learnt from my companions. Then you made me recite my lessons, and it was as if nothing were so agreeable to hear as a spelling or poetry lesson, or the rules of grammatical agreement or of composition. With tears of admiration I see you again as you used to sit up with me late into the night, in bed and almost dropping with sleep, to hear me recite my lessons, and sustaining my courage and perseverance better than ever Athena did Diomed's."¹

It is a charming picture, and at times a touching one. Psellus's mother as we have already seen had not received much instruction, and difficulties often arose when the child became confused and unable to understand something, and when Theodota, struggling in vain to have him repeat the passage, did not succeed in helping him out of his quandary. "Then," continues Psellus, "raising your hands to God and beating your breast, you invoked Heaven to remove my difficulties by inspiration from on high." And

¹ This translation is taken from A. N. Rambaud's interesting article upon Michael Psellus (*Revue historique*, 1877).

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

the writer could truthfully affirm of this admirable woman that she was not merely his mother after the flesh but his spiritual mother as well, she who had given his soul the adornment of letters. "I owe you a double debt," he goes on, "for not only did you bring me into the world, but you also enlightened me with the splendour of learning; you were not willing to depend upon teachers, but desired to light it yourself in my heart."¹ Nor are these, as we might suppose, the exaggerations of a funeral eulogy. Anna Comnena, the learned daughter of the Emperor Alexius I, speaks of Psellus's mother in a passage in her history, mentioning her tender devotion to her beloved son, and how she spent many hours on her knees in the churches, praying with tears for him.

All the members of the family were closely attached to one another. Between Psellus and his elder sister — the younger does not seem to have lived long — there was a strong and deep friendship. She was an attractive young girl. With her beautiful golden hair and fair colouring she was as pretty as her mother, whom she resembled, whereas her brother took after his father's family. Like her mother she adored young Psellus. She shared his thoughts and inculcated right principles upon him; and he in turn gave her absolute obedience, and respected her enormously. Thus, between an attentive elder sister and a devoted mother, this extraordinary child gradually developed.

Psellus tells us a pretty story about his dear sister that shews us clearly the character and habits of this

¹ This translation is taken from A. N. Rambaud's article previously cited.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

pious, virtuous household. There lived near by a very beautiful woman, whose painted face told the tale of her dubious conduct; and in fact she had had lovers by the dozen. Psellus's sister talked seriously to her and tried very hard to lead her back again into the path of virtue. But the woman persisted in her course, replying to all advice with this objection: "That's all very well; but if I give up my profession, how am I to live?" The charitable young girl promised that she should want for nothing; and they made an agreement that the one should never in future so much as look at a man, and that the other should share home, food, clothes, and raiment, with her penitent. And she rejoiced at having saved a soul from perdition. Her strange rescue was rather disapproved of, even in her own family; but she replied to every observation with a smile, and let them have their say. For a time their little neighbour kept to the straight and narrow path; she modestly lowered her eyes, presented a respectable appearance, went to church, veiled her face, and if a man looked at her, blushed deeply. Fine clothes, jewels, beautiful bright-coloured shoes — she gave them all up, and her conversion seemed assured.

Unfortunately it did not last long. Meanwhile Psellus's sister married; unaware of her penitent's relapse, she continued to take an affectionate interest in her. A rather tragic circumstance arose to shatter her trust. Psellus's sister was about to become a mother, and her delivery was very slow. The women of her kin were helping her, together with her pretty friend, and the sufferer seemed to have looks and thanks for her alone. At last, one of the women,

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

becoming impatient and a little jealous, blurted out: "No wonder things aren't going as they should. A pregnant woman has no right to help a woman in childbed. That's the rule of the gynaeceum." Psellus's sister asked in amazement to whom she referred, and was shewn — in a manner too brutal to relate — that the girl had betrayed her friendship. Deceived and deeply disgusted, she drove her unworthy friend out of her sight, and was at once delivered with the greatest ease.

In spite of sorrows such as this, the family was happy and contented in the main. The children were grown up, the daughter was settled in life, and the son, who was now sixteen, had just obtained government employment; and though he was sorry at having to give up his studies, he rejoiced at the prospect of travelling. "Then for the first time" says this very stay-at-home Byzantine, "I left the city and saw the walls; for the first time I discovered the country." But a terrible misfortune was suddenly to ruin his happiness.

III

This was in 1034. Suddenly, his sister fell ill, and in a few days she died, stricken in the flower of her youth, and so radiant even in death that everyone stopped as the funeral procession went by to take a last look at the beautiful dead woman, lying amid her lovely golden hair. Psellus at the time was absent from Constantinople. His parents, knowing his deep affection for his sister, feared that the sudden news of their sorrow might perhaps cause another catastrophe; and they resolved to call the young

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

man home on some excuse in order to prepare him gently and to comfort him in his affliction. They therefore wrote to him to return to Byzantium to finish his interrupted studies, and gave him, as usual, good news of his sister. But chance brutally set at naught all their affectionate precautions. Here we must let Psellus speak for himself, for the passage, surely one of the most beautiful in the funeral eulogy, is charged with genuine emotion and sincere sorrow; it is revelatory of the man, as distinct from the man of letters; and it contains a mine of interesting information upon Byzantine customs, still thoroughly saturated, despite Christianity, with classical and pagan influences.

“I had just passed the wall,” says Psellus, “and was within the town and near to the cemetery where my sister lay. It happened to be the seventh day after the funeral, and many of our relatives were gathered there to weep for her and to try to console my mother. I greeted one of them, a good man devoid of malice, who was not in the secret of the pious fraud whereby my parents had ensured my return. I asked for news of my father and mother and of several of my relatives. He answered frankly without circumlocution: ‘Your father is making the funeral laments at your sister’s tomb, and your mother is with him, inconsolable, as you know, from grief.’ Thus he replied, and what my feelings were I do not know. Voiceless and lifeless, as if struck by fire from heaven, I fell down off my horse. The cries that went up around me came to my parents’ ears and another lamentation was raised; tears and weeping, this time for me, broke forth again with greater violence

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

than before, like an ill-extinguished brazier that a sudden breeze starts up afresh. They looked wildly at me, and for the first time my mother ventured to lift her veil, careless of whether men saw her or not. They bent over me, each one trying to touch me and seeking to bring me back to life by their groans. I was lifted up half dead and carried near to my sister's tomb." ¹

One can see how many of the old customs of Hellenic antiquity were still preserved in Christian Byzantium in the eleventh century. These parents and relatives coming seven days after the funeral to weep over the grave of the beloved dead make the very scene that figures on many beautiful Attic funerary vases, and it is not uncommon to find on the white-ground lekythoi from Athenian cemeteries the same episode that Psellus here describes: the young man returning from abroad, whom the sight of his relatives gathered around a tomb acquaints with the sorrow that in his absence has befallen the family. It is not to the gates of Constantinople, in the shade of the churches near the great wall, that this narrative of the Byzantine writer carries us back; but rather to the beautiful, melancholy cemetery of the Ceramicus at Athens, with its high, sculptured stelae decked by the survivors with fillets and garlands of flowers. And a thing no less ancient is the funeral lament that Psellus, on regaining consciousness, improvised, amid his assembled relatives above the grave of his dead sister.

“When I opened my eyes and beheld my sister's tomb, I understood the full extent of my sorrow,

¹ From Rambaud's translation.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and, coming to my senses, I poured upon her ashes, as it had been a funeral libation, the rivulets of my tears:

“‘O my sweet friend!’ I cried — for I thought of her not only as a sister, but called her by all the most affectionate and tender names — ‘O marvel of beauty, matchless being, virtue without peer, fair statue dowered with a human soul, spur of persuasion, siren of speech, grace invincible! O thou who art all to me and more than mine own soul! How hast thou abandoned thy brother? How couldst thou tear thyself away from him who grew up with thee? How hast thou resigned thyself to this cruel separation? But say: what habitation hath received thee? in what abode dost thou rest? in the midst of what meadows? with what pleasant scenes and what gardens dost thou refresh thine eyes? What happiness hast thou preferred above me? By what flowers art thou seduced? by what roses, by what murmuring streams? What nightingales charm thee with their sweet singing, what grasshoppers with their burden?’¹ Of thy beauty doth aught remain, or hath death destroyed it all? Is the light of thine eyes extinguished, the flower of thy lips faded away, or doth the grave guard thy beauty as a treasure?’”

Around him his relatives were weeping, while the multitude accompanied with tears the funeral lament. Doubtless it contains a certain amount of rhetoric — on the occasions of both his father’s and his mother’s death Psellus uttered his woe in very similar terms and with the same literary flourishes —; but the emotion expressed is none the less sincere; and

¹ From Rambaud’s translation.

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

there are, besides, many points of interest in the passage quoted for the history of the development of ideas. It is not the Christian Paradise that Psellus calls up to our eyes; those shady, flower-starred gardens, where the souls of the dead wander amid the song of birds and the murmur of running waters, are the Elysian Fields of old.

But alongside of these pagan survivals, Byzantine Christianity reappears. When, after some difficulty, the parents had dragged their son away from the grave, begging him to pity their own sorrow, Psellus suddenly looked at his mother, and his grief was redoubled. For Theodota was dressed in the black habit of a nun, and her hair was cut off. At the bed-side of her dying child, as soon as the girl was dead, her head pillowed softly on her mother's bosom, Theodota, in tears, after closing her daughter's eyes, resolved to devote herself henceforth to God. Her husband, weak man that he was, groaned and sighed, overwhelmed with sorrow. She, on the contrary, mastering her grief, exhorted her husband to follow her example in seeking consolation in the religious life, and persuaded him into consenting to the wish that she had cherished for so long. Near where her daughter was buried there was a convent, and thither she retired to be the nearer to her dead and to God. She gave up the world and earthly affections; and her husband, following her example, likewise took the vows. Such renunciations were by no means rare in Byzantium. In this society, upon which mysticism had made a profound impression, the cloister was the usual refuge both from a great sorrow and from a great disgrace. In joining

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

them one was obliged to take neither orders nor the final vows. Between the convent and the world the separation was not complete nor the gulf impassable. After having entered, whether from vexation or despair, it was not very difficult to leave; and even in the shelter of a monastery one did not lose all contact with the outer world. In her retreat Theodota had no intention of giving up the son she loved so dearly.

IV

The convent-life of this woman, always inclined to devotion and still further aroused by a great sorrow, is not difficult to imagine. Like all ascetics her chief concern was the mortification of the flesh, "the mastery of the beast", as Psellus puts it, the crushing of every untimely imagination, of every unbecoming word, of every vain thought of worldly glory, of every earthly tie, so as to live wholly in God, a pure spirit. She slept on the bare earth, fasted, drank only water, was always closely veiled, and spent many hours in prayer, hoping to find in these mystical outpourings a means of closer contact with God; and Psellus describes her under these conditions as wrapped in a sort of ecstasy, motionless, moving neither hand nor foot nor head, like the lifeless icons upon the church walls, with the light of her eyes alone to shew that she was still of this world. One thing, however, still held her to earth; namely, her love for her son. Near the two monasteries to which his parents had retired young Psellus continued his studies, and we see him paying them frequent visits, entering with them into long philosophical and reli-

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

gious conversations, and ever seeking advice and consolation, mainly from Theodota. And the rule was not so strict but that the young man could often dine and spend the night in the convent.

In like manner, despite separation, the close, persistent unity of the family found expression in time of sorrow. One day Psellus's father fell suddenly ill, and the son, who seems at last to have perceived all the good man's charm and simplicity, hurried in tears to his side. But Theodota was also by the dying man's bed; she gave him consolation in his last hours, received his parting advice, and mourned him sincerely. These are the touching words of farewell which the dying man addressed to his son: "My child, I am about to set forth upon the great journey. I charge you not to weep too much for me, but rather to assuage your mother's grief." By the death-bed, mother and son fell into each other's arms, and, notwithstanding her piety and her detachment from earthly affairs, Theodota wept bitterly, and only with difficulty was able to recover her composure. Doubtless the Church's teaching then came to her mind; she argued with herself that now for the first time her husband was indeed delivered from human ties, and truly free; and she explained to her son that his own tears merely proved that he had not escaped from the prison-house of the world, that he had not yet reached the haven, but was still a wanderer upon the stormy sea of life. But those were her second thoughts; and it is not unpleasant to see the motionless icon affected as a woman should be. Her piety, great as it was, had not obliterated every other feeling.

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

After this latest trial the fires of devotion waxed yet hotter within her impassioned soul. In her desire to dispense with every superfluity she did without the very necessities of life, and her body became thin, diaphanous, almost ethereal. In vain her relatives reproached her for her excessive asceticism; in vain her aged father remonstrated with her and urged her to change her mode of life. Though at times she allowed herself to be influenced by these loving admonitions, and, to please her family, ordered a more liberal meal, nevertheless, when she came to eat, she mastered herself once more, feeling that she had been on the point of committing a great sin, and hurriedly sent out into the streets for some poor woman to eat of the dinner that had been served to her; and in her delight at escaping temptation called her chance guest her benefactress and deliverer. But she was growing weaker day by day, and now needed two servants to help her into church and support her during the Office. And in this way Theodota had acquired a great reputation for sanctity.

However, she had not assumed the religious habit, humbly thinking herself unworthy of such an honour, and yet, feeling that her end was near, she eagerly coveted this supreme blessing. One of her friends in the convent had a dream. She was in the imperial box in the Hippodrome, and there she saw a mysterious golden throne, so resplendent that one could scarcely look at it, and around it other thrones of gold or ivory ranged in a half circle. To one side, a little to the right, was placed a throne made of some special, unknown material, both dull and shining at the same time. And when she asked

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

for whom this splendid seat was prepared, a voice replied that it was the throne of Theodota. "The Emperor" — that is to say, the King of Heaven — "has commanded it to be made ready, for she will soon come to occupy it." This was her notification of approaching death, and also the indication of her future sainthood. So Theodota resolved to take the veil.

It was a solemn and touching ceremony. The convent church was decorated as if for a festival; the nuns filled the apse, and the priest was at the altar. Psellus was also there in the forefront of the assembled multitude. To the general amazement the new nun, usually so feeble and weak that she had to be carried in on a litter, was able by a supreme effort to stand on her feet on this great occasion. Illuminated with a supernatural beauty, "like a bride going to meet her bridegroom", she came in with no one to hold her up, and throughout the long service of consecration stood erect and unfaltering. From the priest's hands she received the gold ring, the sandals, and the cross; and then she made her communion. Psellus in deep emotion fell at the holy woman's feet. Turning to him, she said softly: "May you one day also experience all these blessings, my son." At the same time the expression of her face changed and an unnatural clarity shone from within her. The end was near. She needed a little rest, and sat down on a low bench. Then suddenly, as if beholding on her right hand something invisible to human eyes, she started up and fell back again lifeless. On regaining consciousness she called insistently one last time for her beloved child, and died

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

peacefully, faithful to the end to the two affections that had occupied and dominated her life — her love for her son and her love for God.

We can imagine Psellus's grief on arriving too late to receive his mother's last kiss; he himself tells us of it. "I fell to earth like one dead, knowing nothing of what went on around me, until those who were present had thrown cold water on my face and made me inhale perfumes to revive me." I omit the lament which, with his usual facility, he improvised before his mother's bier, and pass to the description of the funeral which Constantinople gave to Theodota. The entire city gathered together, everyone wishing to touch for a last time the body, the hands, and the face of the holy woman. They tore in pieces the last garment that she had worn and divided it among themselves as relics; and the dead woman's aged father, as he stood by the bed on which her body lay, could justly say to her weeping mother: "Mark my words, woman, you have borne a saint and a martyr."

V

Nevertheless, it is not in her holy dying nor in the last years of her pious life that Theodota's chief interest lies, but rather in her great love for her son. All his life long Psellus was firmly convinced that she who had guided his youth continued her loving watch in Heaven; and more than once the philosopher reproaches himself for having to some extent deceived the holy woman's hopes by embracing ideas other than those of which she would have approved.

A MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY

And there is surely something paradoxical in the fact that the good man whose life "was like oil flowing noiselessly", the worthy citizen, so "slow of speech", should have had for a son the busiest, the most active, and the most intriguing of courtiers, and the readiest of orators; and that the pious mother who died in the odour of sanctity, should have given birth to the most liberal, the most open-minded, and the most scientific man of his time. Psellus was keenly aware of the contrast, and of the extent to which he differed from his parents. But with him the love of learning was the stronger. "I ought to think only of God" he says somewhere, "but my nature and the imperious desire of my soul to attain all knowledge have drawn me to science." What this science was, its immensity and its profundity, he himself has been so good as to inform us. He tells us that at the age of twenty-five he knew all that there was to be known, rhetoric and philosophy, geometry and music, law and astronomy, medicine, physics, and even the occult sciences; and that, from Neoplatonism and "the admirable Proclus", he had risen step by step to "the pure light of Plato." And in the depths of his soul, despite occasional scruples, his great, emancipated intellect never regretted his knowledge; and when all is said, his mother in Heaven must have been pleased with him. It was because he was a person of eminent learning that he, a man of letters, became attached to the court and rose to the position of Prime Minister; and thus, though after another fashion, he fulfilled the great ambitions and the splendid destiny that his mother had dreamt for him at his cradle-side.

XII

ANNA DALASSENA:

A NOBLE FAMILY OF THE ELEVENTH CENTURY

AMONG the great feudal and military families of the Byzantine aristocracy, one of the most celebrated towards the middle of the eleventh century was that of the Comneni. In addition to its wealth, its vast Asiatic domains, its many vassals and clients, it could boast the splendid services performed by its various members; and Isaac, the head of the house, was one of the monarchy's most illustrious generals. Therefore, when in 1057 the great military leaders, weary of the distrust with which the civil authority regarded them, decided to revolt, they unanimously proclaimed Comnenus Basileus of the Romans. Isaac thus foreshadowed the future greatness of his house.

Hardly two years after he had ascended the throne, however, the new Emperor in discouragement, unable to effect the reforms that he had intended, and ill into the bargain, decided to abdicate. For a while he had considered transferring the throne to his brother John, whom he had already raised to the high rank of Curopalates and Grand Domestic; but the latter was daunted by the weight of empire and obstinately refused. In vain his wife, Anna

ANNA DALASSEN A

Dalassena, strove to arouse his courage; in vain she pointed out the perils to which he was exposing his family, since, as possible candidates for the throne, they would naturally be objects of suspicion to any government; in vain, with tears and reproaches, she bitterly scoffed at such philosophical detachment and such dangerous moderation. She could make no impression upon him. On John's refusal, the throne fell to the President of the Senate, Constantine Ducas. But all her life long Anna Dalassena never forgot those embittered arguments of November, 1059. She was never able to resign herself to the loss of the imperial diadem which a word from her husband would have placed upon her head; she never forgave the house of Ducas for ascending the throne on which she had hoped to sit. Henceforth she had but one aim in life; namely, to recover the lost opportunity, to be revenged upon fate, and to regain for her family the supreme power that she herself had thought to wield; and, since she was as able and stubborn as she was ambitious, she succeeded. The *coup d'état* of 1081, which set the Comnenian dynasty upon the throne for more than a century, was the indirect but certain and logical result of her tenacious energy, of her passionate desire for the glory of her house, and of the deep, unalterable devotion for her children which she displayed in every conjuncture.

I

If we leave out of account the difference in their social positions, Anna Dalassena, the aristocrat, was

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

very like Psellus's middle-class mother. Like her she was devout, charitable, and virtuous; like her she took pleasure in the society of priests and monks, and longed to end her days in a convent; like her she spent a large part of her nights in prayer and in chanting psalms, and in society maintained a grave and serious countenance that inspired the frivolous with a mixture of respect and fear. Like Psellus's mother also she joined to her great love of God a passionate devotion to her children. In an official document her son, the Emperor Alexius, at a later day testifies to her thus: "Nothing can be compared to a tender mother who loves her children. In all the world there is no stronger support, whether against annoyance or against impending danger. If she gives advice, her advice is good; if she prays, her all-powerful prayer is an invincible protection to its object. Such has been to me since my earliest youth my revered mother and sovereign, who in every circumstance was my teacher and my guide. We were two bodies with one soul, and by God's grace this close and beautiful union still exists to-day."

It is certain that Anna Dalassena exercised a deep and decisive influence upon her sons. Like Psellus's mother, she was the man of the family; and when, in 1067, her husband's death left her a widow with eight children, five boys and three girls, her already strong influence became even greater. It was she who really brought up all her sons and made them the remarkable men they were, capable of accomplishing the high destinies that she so keenly desired for them and towards which she guided their steps. She listened gladly to those who foretold that her

ANNA DALASSENA

children would reign; but above all she spared no pains to bring these prophecies to pass. "It was through her prayers, mounting ceaselessly to the ears of the Lord" continues her son Alexius, "that we have risen to the pinnacle of power." And history, therefore, rightly terms her "the Mother of the Comneni."

The only difference between those two equally devoted mothers, the mother of Psellus and the mother of the Comneni, is that Anna Dalassena, because of her birth, her wealth, and the prestige of her great name, commanded resources for the furtherance of her ambitions that the humble Theodota lacked. As member of a great house and daughter of a man who had held high positions in the Theme of Italy; belonging on her mother's side to the illustrious family of the Dalasseni, whose fame had worried many Emperors; married to a Comnenus, and related to all that was greatest in the Byzantine aristocracy; she had always lived in society and at court, and there had learnt the art of intrigue which she practised with great competence, surmounting obstacles with extraordinary dexterity, and extricating herself with consummate skill from the most dangerous situations.

In addition to these valuable but rather subordinate gifts, Anna possessed some eminent qualities. Her son Alexius and her granddaughter, Anna Comnena, never mention her but in terms of unalloyed admiration. She had a first-rate intellect, "a powerful mind, truly royal and worthy of the throne." From her youth up she had displayed a strong energetic will and sound common sense; her clear

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and well-ordered brain was constantly active. "It was extraordinary" writes Anna Comnena, "to find so old a head on such young shoulders; and all her earnestness and worth were obvious at a glance." She had a statesman's mind. Her admirable understanding of affairs and her thorough grasp of politics would have qualified her to rule a world. She brought to her task some remarkable natural gifts, such as that of easy, concise speech, never at a loss for the right word, and rising without effort to eloquence. "Without her intelligence and acumen" her son¹ said of her, "the monarchy would have been lost." And Anna Comnena pronounces her superior to all the statesmen of her times. "She was" says she, "an honour to her sex and the glory of the human race." Furthermore she was brave, full of lofty assurance, for her sons' sake capable of unbounded devotion and skill; in short, a superior woman, whose lofty qualities justified her immense ambitions. Imperious and intriguing by turns, cautious and bending when she had to be, strong and brave when necessity demanded, and always extraordinarily astute, she was the true architect of the greatness of her house; and such being her character, it is easy to understand the enormous influence which until the day of her death she exercised over her grateful sons.

II

In 1067, when her husband's death left Anna Dalassena head of the family, three of her sons were already grown up. Manuel, the eldest, was in the imperial army; Isaac and Alexius were young men

ANNA DALASSENA

of nineteen or twenty; only Adrian and Nicephorus were still children. Two of her daughters, moreover, were already established, having been married to men of good family, the one to Michael Taronites and the other to Nicephorus Melissenus. The two objects that the mother kept henceforth before her eyes were the education of the younger children and the advancement of the rest.

Circumstances were most favourable. At this time the throne of Byzantium was again occupied by a woman, Eudocia, the widow of Constantine Ducas, who was ruling as Regent in the name of her young son Michael VII. She was an intelligent, educated, even lettered Princess, for, although the mythological poem entitled the *Violarium*, or *The Field of Violets*, is wrongly attributed to her, it is certain that she had a literary impulse; and several of her verses, such as one on Ariadne's hair, another on the pursuits proper to a Princess, and a treatise on the monastic life, are sufficient proof of her tastes and of her literary pretensions. But she was above all an energetic, ambitious woman with a passion for power. "I intend" she said, "to die on the throne." Moreover, before his death her husband, who appreciated her qualities, had deliberately insured her succession, but not without extracting from her in return — the strange precaution of a loving and jealous husband — a written undertaking never to marry again. Eudocia had consented, and her signed promise had been solemnly confided to the keeping of the Patriarch John Xiphilin.

Unfortunately for the Basileus Constantine X's last wishes, the Empire was in a situation that was

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

singularly difficult for a woman; the need of a man was strongly felt, and besides, Eudocia, though on the verge of forty, was temperamentally unsuited to widowhood. She had just fallen passionately in love with the handsome Romanus Diogenes, a general who upon the death of the Emperor had attempted a military uprising. Having been conquered and brought prisoner to Constantinople, he was awaiting his sentence when, to the surprise of the court, the Empress granted him a pardon; presently she became determined to marry him. One thing, however, stood in her way; namely, the unlucky document in the possession of the Patriarch. The Regent very cleverly circumvented the prelate; she feigned violent love of Xiphilin's brother, and he, not wishing to fly in the face of the good fortune that was smiling on his family, consented to give back to Eudocia the paper containing her promise. No sooner had the Basilissa regained possession of it than she threw off the mask and married Romanus Diogenes.

"Man is a fickle animal," says Psellus, philosophising upon this incident, "particularly when he can find special reasons for his fickleness." But other people took it by no means so philosophically. The Caesar John Ducas, brother to the deceased Emperor, seeing himself thus thrust aside, and the Patriarch Xiphilin, furious at having been tricked, did not conceal their discontent; and Psellus himself, who had been Constantine X's favourite minister and who was now tutor to the young Michael VII, ended by being displeased at the new political situation. For the accession of Romanus was practically the triumph of the army; and the civilian party was

ANNA DALASSENA

filled with anxiety, exasperated and absolutely opposed to an Emperor who threatened their influence.

It was this very situation that brought the Comneni into touch with the court once more. Besides the fact that Eudocia was in some way related to them, their name and the memory of the Emperor Isaac, their uncle, caused them to be regarded as the most illustrious representatives and as the strongest partisans of the theories of military reorganisation and energetic action symbolised by the elevation of Romanus. Furthermore, Anna Dalassena was too delighted at the downfall of her enemies, the Ducae, to begrudge her help or refuse her sympathy to the new régime. The entire family were thus in great favour at the Palace. Anna Dalassena married her youngest daughter to Constantine Diogenes, a near relative of the Basileus; for her son Manuel she obtained the highest dignities. He was made Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the East, became Protoproedros and afterwards Curopalates, and distinguished himself by brilliant exploits at the head of his troops. Thanks to him, the name of Comnenus was once more becoming popular with the army, and Anna Dalassena was revelling in her expectations, when suddenly the young general fell dangerously ill in Bithynia.

At this news the terrified mother set out in haste to her son's bed-side; by a last effort of will Manuel, already on the point of death, rose from his bed to receive her and threw himself into her arms with hardly the strength to utter a few words. Then he fell back, and, after expressing the wish to be buried in the same tomb in which later his beloved mother

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

would rest, he grew weaker and expired. No better proof than this anecdote is wanted of the profound respect and tender love that Anna Dalassena had inspired in her children; and no better demonstration than its sequel is needed of her extraordinary energy. Manuel's death was more to her than a terrible sorrow; it was the ruin of all the hopes that she had built upon his budding fame. But despite her great loss and her despair, Anna Dalassena rallied from the blow. One Comnenus was dead; therefore another must continue the tradition and insure the destiny of the race. She immediately decided to send her third son, Alexius, to the army. But the Emperor shewed more compassion than the mother. When Comnenus came to ask his permission to leave, he answered: "Your mother must not be left alone in her sorrow, and I do not wish that her grief at the loss of one of her sons should be increased by the absence of another." So he sent the young man back to Anna Dalassena.

The revolution of 1071 destroyed at one stroke all Anna's patient toil. It is well known that the defeat of Romanus IV at Manzikert by the Turks and his capture by the Sultan unloosed at court all the animosity that had long been accumulating against him, and that the party of the Ducae, after pronouncing him dethroned, never hesitated, when he had been released from captivity, to make war upon him as upon an enemy. Anna Dalassena remained obstinately faithful to this Emperor whom the Empire had placed under a ban. Soon she was accused of being in secret correspondence with him and was summoned before a tribunal; her condem-

ANNA DALASSENA

nation seemed a foregone conclusion. But, firm and haughty as ever, she quickly produced a crucifix from under her cloak and brandished it in the faces of the disconcerted judges, saying: "Here is my Judge and yours. Think on Him when you sentence me, and take care that your sentence be worthy of the Supreme Judge who knoweth the secrets of the heart." At this unexpected outburst the tribunal was sadly at a loss. Some were already disposed to acquit her; but the greater number were afraid of the new master's wrath. They made a cowardly compromise which the friends of the Comneni aptly styled "the judgement of Caiaphas." Anna Dalassena was banished with her sons to one of the Princes' Islands.

III

Nevertheless, their disgrace was of short duration. Their great adversary, the Caesar John Ducas, who had taken the place of Romanus and Eudocia in the government, soon fell out with his nephew, the Emperor Michael VII, and was obliged to leave court and retire to his estates in Asia. In spite of their downfall, the Comneni were too powerful for the new ministers not to feel at this juncture the necessity of conciliating them and making sure of their support. They were, therefore, recalled from banishment. Presently, in order to be the more certain of their co-operation, the Emperor married Isaac, the head of the house, to a cousin of Mary of Alania, the Empress, and soon afterwards appointed him Commander-in-Chief of the army of the East, the post that his brother Manuel had formerly

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

held. Isaac took his younger brother Alexius with him. Henceforth the family fortunes waxed ever greater.

Alexius Comnenus, the future Emperor, was now twenty-three or -four years of age, and Isaac but very little older. Both were excellent soldiers, devoted to war, and brave — the elder, at least — to the point of rashness. He used to fall upon the enemy “like a thunderbolt”, and more than once, through his imprudence, fell into the hands of the infidel. Alexius, though equally brave, was of a soberer and calmer disposition. Physically, he was of medium height, but well built and strong; with his swarthy skin, his black hair, and his dark flashing eyes he was very good-looking and most fascinating. He was accustomed to every kind of physical exercise: a mighty hunter, a graceful and tireless horseman, eager for action and warlike adventures. But in addition to these physical activities he was possessed of exceptional self-control and a singular aptitude for intrigue. Intelligent, well-educated, and a good speaker, he cherished in secret a firm and tenacious will; only, being of a gentle disposition, he preferred to attain his ends by diplomacy rather than by force. Like all his brothers he was devotedly attached to his mother and was her unacknowledged favourite; she considered him better fitted than the others to realise her ambitious hopes, and therefore had urged him from the outset to a military career, and later had sent him as lieutenant to his elder brother Isaac. In all of which Anna Dalassena proved her clear-sightedness. By their exploits and their brilliant courage the two Comneni were to win a matchless glory for their name.

ANNA DALASSEN A

During the years 1072–1073 the position of the Empire was extremely grave. On the Asiatic frontier the Turks were threatening; and to this peril the revolt of a leader of mercenaries, the Norman Roussel de Bailleul, added a further complication. Though obliged to carry on the struggle against the infidel with forces greatly reduced by this insurrection, the two brothers nevertheless accomplished wonders. If we are to credit the family chronicles, which celebrate with a doubtless not impartial enthusiasm their courage and their close friendship — Anna Comnena says that they were as united as Orestes and Pylades —; their exploits were those of heroes. In an engagement one day Isaac had his horse killed under him and fell into the hands of the Turks. Alexius was doing his best under great difficulties to save the army and cover his retreat, when suddenly the troops were seized with panic and scattered, leaving their young general almost alone. Obligated to fly, with the Mohammedans pressing hard upon his tracks, Alexius escaped as by a miracle, and after a short rest in a ruined village succeeded at last with a few men in making his way to Ancyra. His one thought now being to deliver his brother as soon as possible, he hurried to Constantinople to collect the necessary ransom. On his return he was surprised to find Isaac already at liberty: the Cappadocian nobles had generously subscribed the money to liberate the heir to so illustrious a name. The two brothers then started again for the capital, and once more, in the outskirts of Nicomedia, were set upon by a band of Turks and surrounded. With mighty sword-strokes they cleared a path, and after

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

accomplishing the most prodigious feats of arms at last got away, and, though desperately pursued, succeeded in bringing all their followers to a place of safety. On returning to Constantinople after this epic adventure the enthusiastic populace gave them a triumphant welcome, and gazed with love and admiration on him whom they called affectionately "the golden youth" (*ὁ χρυσοῦς νεανίας Ἀλέξιος*).

So brilliant a renown was inevitably disturbing to the authorities, and they tried to get rid of these altogether too popular young men. Isaac was dispatched as Duke of Antioch, to distant Syria; Alexius was raised to the rank of Stratopedarch and sent to fight and conquer Roussel de Bailleul. But for this difficult undertaking he was given few soldiers and no money. In spite of the reluctance his mother felt at seeing him endanger his youthful fame in an expedition destined to failure, Alexius accepted the command. And such was his tact and diplomacy that, in a situation which seemed likely to cost him his reputation, he found means to enhance it. He began by cutting off the rebel's supplies and then, by a cleverly-managed betrayal, took him captive and brought him back in triumph to Constantinople. The Emperor Michael VII in greeting the young hero shewed him the utmost favour: "Welcome be he who, after God, is our right arm." At this time, 1074, Alexius was one of the most conspicuous persons in Byzantium.

Now, at this very time, dissatisfaction with the Basileus was universal. The Prime Minister's shameless greed was exhausting the finances and causing a famine in the Empire; and the army, no longer

ANNA DALASSENA

receiving its pay, was mutinous. Ambitious men profited by the confusion in which Michael's feeble government floundered. In Europe Nicephorus Bryennius had proclaimed himself Emperor; and in Asia Nicephorus Botoniates, with the support of the great feudal nobility and even of a part of the Senate, had assumed the purple. Between the government and the rival pretenders Alexius Comnenus steered his way with great dexterity, and, by becoming no one's tool, strengthened his own position, so that he soon became an indispensable person, whose support all parties bespoke and endeavoured to obtain. With consummate skill he profited by his opportunities in order to fortify his position.

A short time before, Alexius had lost his wife. To take her place two equally brilliant and useful matches were proposed to him. The Emperor offered him the hand of his sister Zoë, and the Caesar John Ducas hoped to marry him to his granddaughter Irene. Having to choose between these two alliances, Comnenus easily understood the advantage of the second, which, by uniting the interests of the two most illustrious families of the Byzantine nobility, would supply an invaluable prop to his future ambitions. He chose John Ducas's granddaughter. But his choice met with violent opposition from several quarters. The Emperor, who was wounded at seeing his offer refused, shewed determined hostility; but more unexpected was the antagonism that Anna Dalassena at first displayed to her son's wishes: the old obstinate hatred that she cherished towards the Ducae obscured for a time her usual clearness of vision, and led her to forget the obvious interests

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

of her house. But at this juncture Alexius's firmness and political acumen became apparent. While protesting that he would never run counter to his mother's wishes, he refrained from yielding to her reproaches; with skill and patience he undertook to overcome her objections, and with the assistance of his future mother-in-law's astute diplomacy succeeded in breaking down all obstacles. Anna Dalassena, not without reluctance, gave her consent; the Basileus was induced to do likewise, and in the end of 1077 the marriage took place. As we shall see later, Anna Dalassena always nursed a stubborn dislike for her daughter-in-law, the more so because she had been obliged, for the first time in her life, to bend to her son's will.

But it must be conceded that in this contest Alexius was right, as subsequent events were fully to prove. The Ducas alliance was a very strong point in his game; for, as between the rival parties, it enabled him to give his support where his personal advantage lay, and thus to become virtual master of the situation. At first he remained faithful to the established government, and in the beginning of 1078 vanquished Nicephorus Bryennius in Macedonia. But when, shortly afterwards, Botoniates dethroned Michael VII, Comnenus considered it more profitable to throw in his lot with the new régime. So valuable an adherent received the reward that he deserved: Alexius was created Grand Domestic of the Scholae with the title of Nobilissimus, and he was undoubtedly the chief defender and the best support of the Basileus. A second time he defeated Nicephorus Bryennius, and then crushed another

ANNA DALASSENA

pretender, Basilaces, and brought them both back captive to the Emperor's feet. A new dignity rewarded this success: he was created Proedros. But his chief gain was an immense increase of popularity. Because of his brilliant victories he was the idol of the soldiers, who shouted for him on every occasion and would have no other leader. Through his marriage he had rallied to his side the greater part of the feudal aristocracy whose claims he represented, and had furthermore won the support of the Patriarch, who was blindly devoted to the house of Ducas. And because of his good looks and the halo of glory that surrounded his name he delighted the mob. Alexius Comnenus was entitled to indulge in the loftiest hopes.

IV

Now at this very moment the Emperor Nicephorus Botoniates was becoming more and more unpopular. His ministers, like those of Michael VII before him, squandered the money that had been painstakingly collected; and, since the need of the Treasury was great, the exactions of the imperial bureaucracy further augmented the unrest. The army, increasingly disgusted with the feeble government of the Empire, was irritated at being neglected, badly paid, and for ever sacrificed to the interests of the civil administration. The Asiatic regiments were murmuring; in the capital the Varangians, the guardsoldiers whose fidelity seemed most certain, were in revolt, and their mutiny was with difficulty suppressed. Furthermore Botoniates was old, apathetic, and rather ridiculous. From every quarter men

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

called for a new dynasty, and the revolt of Nicephorus Melissenus, who had assumed the purple in Asia, was clear proof of the imminent crisis.

The civilian party was naturally much disquieted at the situation, and its leaders, the ministers, were greatly concerned at the popularity of the Comneni, who seemed the chosen leaders of the feudal and military party. They had already manifested their distrust of Alexius by forbidding him, after his victory over Bryennius, to celebrate his triumph in the capital. They now tried to compromise him with the Emperor, pointing out that the Asiatic pretender was brother-in-law to the Comneni, reminding him that Alexius — very prudently, by the way — had just refused to command the forces sent against the rebel; and they tried to prove that an understanding existed between Comnenus and the usurper to bring about his downfall. But Alexius, as we know, was a past-master at the subtle game of intrigue; to his enemies' plots he replied by counterplots, and in the Palace itself, where they were conspiring to overthrow him, contrived by a stroke of genius to obtain an all-powerful coadjutor.

Michael VII, when he was Emperor, had married the Princess Mary of Alania. She was a very handsome woman, tall, elegant, with skin as white as snow and charming bright eyes, and was of unparalleled grace and fascination. "Neither Apelles nor Phidias" says Anna Comnena, "ever created anything so beautiful." "She was a living statue," we read elsewhere, "whom lovers of the beautiful could never weary of admiring; or, rather, she was Love incarnate descended to earth." This beautiful crea-

ANNA DALASSENA

ture as may well be imagined, had inspired many men with a great passion. Nicephorus Botoniates himself on ascending the throne had not been insensible to her charms, and, although he was no longer very young and twice a widower, had determined to marry her. There was a difficulty, to be sure; the young woman's husband, the dethroned Emperor Michael VII, was still alive; but he had been forced to enter a monastery, and so might be considered dead and his marriage dissolved. For a while, however, Nicephorus hesitated, and being most anxious to legitimate his usurpation by an imperial marriage, had thought of taking to wife the widow of Constantine X and of Romanus Diogenes, Eudocia, who would gladly have shared his throne. That would have been a sensible match by reason of the parity of their ages; but Mary was far more beautiful and fascinating, and Botoniates was unable to resist. In spite of the distaste of the Church at sanctioning this doubly-incorrect alliance, the Basileus decided upon a third marriage and wedded his predecessor's wife.

Mary of Alania had yielded without enthusiasm to Nicephorus, and for no other reason than to safeguard the interests of her young son Constantine, aged four; but she was unable to love the old husband who had thrust himself upon her. Alexius Comnenus, on the other hand, was, as we have seen, most attractive, and it appears that the Empress soon fell in love with him; before long it was rumoured in the capital that they were on the most intimate terms. It seems likely enough; in any case it is certain that the Basilissa definitely sided with

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

the Comneni and shewed them every favour. Furthermore, by her cousin's marriage with Isaac, the head of the family, she was a connexion of theirs, and, thanks to this alliance, Isaac, who at that time was in Constantinople, had ready access to her. He used his opportunities to further his brother's interests and to ingratiate him with the Gynaeceum where everyone was working on his behalf; and even Anna Dalassena, from dislike of her daughter-in-law Irene Ducaena, watched her son's manœuvres without disapproval and abetted him with all her power. The result of these intrigues was an unexpected one: Mary of Alania adopted Alexius Comnenus. Thus he became a member of the imperial family, and, being admitted officially into the private life of the Palace, found himself in an even better position than before to follow the progress of the conspiracy against him.

The Emperor had been won over by his ministers, and had taken the serious step of nominating as his successor his nephew Synadenus. When Mary of Alania learnt of this choice that so brutally disregarded her son's rights, her anger knew no bounds; and, when informed of it by her, the Comneni, who had been well coached by their mother, inflamed her indignation still further. The Emperor's advisers now determined upon the decisive step of putting out the brothers' eyes. But for some time past Isaac and Alexius had been so suspicious that they are said to have taken the precaution of never both being in the Palace at the same time. Having been warned, doubtless by the Empress, of what was in store for them, they decided to precipitate matters and stake everything on a single throw.

ANNA DALASSENA

During the night of the 14th of February, 1081, Isaac and Alexius with their chief supporters fled from the capital, and, having thoughtfully provided themselves with horses from the imperial stables, made their way unpursued to the headquarters of the Army of Thrace. Their leave-taking was so sudden and their flight so rapid that they had been obliged to leave all their womenfolk behind them. And now Anna Dalassena once again displayed all her accustomed energy. Like the sensible woman she was, she hurried in the early hours of the morning to seek sanctuary in the inviolable refuge of St. Sophia, taking with her her daughters, her daughters-in-law, and her grandchildren; and when Nicephorus Botoniates summoned her to come to the Sacred Palace, she refused point-blank, and, clinging to the iconostasis, declared that they would have to cut off her hands to get her away. Against so much resolution the Emperor dared not use force; so he opened negotiations, and finally guaranteed them their lives whatever might happen. He merely took the precaution of imprisoning them in the Petrion convent, whither the daughter-in-law of the Caesar John Ducas, mother-in-law of Alexius Comnenus, soon joined them. And there all these women anxiously awaited the outcome.

They had not long to wait. The conspirators, to whose support the Caesar John Ducas had lent his wealth and his great name, prepared to deliver them. In the camp at Schiza they had hastily proclaimed Alexius Comnenus Emperor, in whose favour his elder brother, Isaac, had generously allowed himself to be passed over, and, arming themselves, had

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

moved upon the capital. Meanwhile the weak Botoniates abandoned himself to his fate, hesitating and taking no useful steps; he seems from the outset to have given up hope. A mercenary opened one of the gates of the city to the rebels. But the end was not yet. Fighting went on in the streets, and Constantinople learnt all the horrors of capture. Perhaps if Botoniates, in the midst of this disorganised strife, had taken some vigorous measures, he might have won; but either he would not, or he dared not. The defection of the fleet finally brought about his downfall. To put an end to useless bloodshed the Basileus, on the Patriarch's advice, decided to abdicate. He entered a monastery, saying merely: "The nuisance is that I shall not be able to eat meat. Otherwise, I don't mind in the slightest."

V

Anna Dalassena could be happy, for her son was Emperor. And as it was she who had prepared his way to the throne, so her influence was preponderant at the beginning of the new dynasty. Alexius Comnenus had family feeling to a high degree. His first act on attaining supreme power was to load all his relatives with honours. For his brothers and brothers-in-law he created new and high-sounding dignities and distributed amongst them the greatest offices of State. For his mother he did even more. From his youth up he had entertained profound respect for her, and had been in the habit of following her advice in everything; on becoming Emperor he still desired her counsel. Therefore he bestowed

ANNA DALASSENA

on her the title of Empress, kept her thoroughly informed, and turned to her on all occasions. To satisfy her piety he imposed a forty days' penance upon himself and upon all his relatives, in expiation of the sack of the capital. To please her he very nearly took a far more serious decision: he contemplated a divorce.

Despite the downfall of Nicephorus Botoniates, the Empress Mary had remained in the Sacred Palace with her son Constantine, and this favourable treatment caused a great deal of comment in Constantinople. It seemed to confirm the rumours that had long been afloat concerning the intimacy of the relations between her and Alexius; above all it contrasted strangely with the manner in which the Basileus was then behaving towards his lawful wife. Whereas the new sovereign, with his mother and all his relatives, had taken up his residence in the Upper Palace of the Bucoleon, Irene with her mother, her sisters, and her grandfather, had been assigned to the Lower Palace, as if to make a distinction between the two families and prepare the way for a rupture. At court and in town gossip was rife, and many were uneasy. Everyone was aware that Anna Dalassena hated the Ducae, and that she had never in her heart approved of her son's marriage with Irene. And, as it was evident that she exercised an all-powerful influence over Alexius and that the Emperor did not disguise his estrangement from his wife, it was soon rumoured that an imperial divorce was imminent and that Anna Dalassena was urging it with all her might and main. It is certain that the Empress-mother was intriguing with the Patriarch Cosmas, and trying to

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

get him to take sides against her daughter-in-law; and it is also certain that on finding him obstinately faithful to the Ducae she considered removing him and putting a more accommodating prelate in his place. One last incident troubled many people's minds. Alexius had himself crowned alone, without associating Irene with him. All this seemed very significant, and the Ducae were greatly worried.

As a matter of fact, Alexius Comnenus was considerably embarrassed between the three women. Mary of Alania pleased him immensely; he had never loved Irene and had married her solely from political considerations; and his personal feelings fitted in only too well with the advice given him by his imperious mother, whom for many years he had been in the habit of obeying. But there lay great danger in antagonising the Ducae. Their adherents were numerous, and they maintained that in the *coup d'état* they had worked far more for Irene's sake than for Alexius's. Cosmas, the Patriarch, expressed himself in no less energetic terms: "I shall not descend from the Patriarchal throne until these hands of mine have crowned Irene." Here again Alexius demonstrated the superiority of his political genius: he overcame his personal inclinations and brought his mother to reason, and before his strong will and shrewd common sense everyone finally gave way. The Ducae were given the satisfaction which guaranteed their support; and seven days after her husband Irene was crowned Basilissa of the Romans.

It was the end of all Mary of Alania's hopes; she retired to the Palace of Mangana after formally proclaiming the rights of her son Constantine to the

ANNA DALASSENA

throne. It was also a disappointment and a check to Anna Dalassena. Her son consoled her by the gift of full power in lieu of revenge. He satisfied her by disgracing the Patriarch who had permitted himself to withstand her; and in the government her power increased day by day. When in the month of August, 1081, he was obliged to leave Constantinople to go to Illyria and fight the Normans under Robert Guiscard, he issued a golden bull investing her with absolute power during his absence.

Anna Comnena has preserved the text of this precious document for us; there exists no more striking proof of Alexius's gratitude towards his mother or of her great influence over him. After calling to mind, in phrases I have already quoted, all that he owed her, the Emperor goes on to entrust "to his sainted and revered mother" the care of the entire administration of the Empire: justice, finance, the government of the provinces, nomination to every office and to every dignity, all are under her control and subject to her approval. "Whatever she may decree," says the Emperor, "whether in writing or by word of mouth, is to be considered final." She had her own seal, which has been preserved, whereon we read: "Lord, protect Anna I, Dalassena, the mother of the Basileus." And such was her authority that, according to Anna Comnena, "the Emperor appeared to be giving up the reins of power and to be running, as it were, by the side of the imperial chariot in which she was seated, contenting himself with the mere title of Basileus." The Princess shews respectful astonishment at the importance and influence of the Gynaecium in the State: "She gave

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

orders, and her son obeyed like a slave. He had the trappings of power, but she the substance."

For Anna Dalassena it was a splendid revenge for the cruel deception she had suffered in 1059. She had dreamt then of becoming Empress, and now her dreams had come true. For some twenty years her son permitted her to rule the Empire jointly with him; and in justice to her it must be admitted that she governed well. She brought order into the government, and followed and regulated in detail the most insignificant matters. She reformed the lax morality of the Sacred Palace and made it as austere and decorous as a monastery. Thenceforth in the imperial dwelling a rigid programme determined the hours of meals and of services, and all were obliged to conform. She herself set the example. Anna Comnena has left an account of her grandmother's daily routine. Part of her nights she spent in prayer; the morning was given up to audiences and to the signing of dispatches; in the afternoon she followed the Divine Office in the chapel of St. Thecla, after which, until evening, she devoted herself once more to public affairs.

Throughout it all she was guided by one thought alone. Being absolutely devoted to her son, she worked only for the glory and prosperity of his reign; but as in growing older she became more imperious and stubborn than ever, in the end her tutelage became too burdensome, and Alexius seems more than once to have been irritated by it. Furthermore she was too severe not to have soon become extremely unpopular. The aged Princess had the sense to realise from these symptoms that her influ-

ANNA DALASSENA

ence was nearing its end. She did not wait to be thrust aside, but towards the year 1100 retired voluntarily to the convent of the Pantepoptes. There, about the year 1105, she died, leaving to all with whom she had come in contact the memory of an extraordinary woman, and to her sons that of an excellent mother.

XIII

THE WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS¹

MANY years ago, in the second half of the eleventh century, there lived in a remote part of the Byzantine Empire a great feudal noble. His name was Cecaumenus, or "The Burnt One," and he doubtless derived this name from some swarthy Asiatic ancestor. At all events, he was well-born and well-connected, and was not without importance in the aristocracy of the Empire. Before retiring to his native Thessaly he had lived in the great world; he had served in the army, had been often at court, and during his long life had had many experiences which had left him somewhat of a misanthrope and even more of a misogynist. But his chief interest lies in the fact that all his life long he remained fundamentally and ineradicably provincial. The pleasures of society, the sophisticated refinements of the capital, the political intrigues and the love-affairs which were the chief pastime of the imperial court, terrified rather than attracted him; and when, having returned to his beloved province

¹ This essay was first printed as a pamphlet, entitled *Un Précurseur de La Rochefoucauld à Byzance*, at the press of Firmin-Didot et Cie., in 1912. It was republished with some alterations as Chapter VIII of *Dans l'orient byzantin* (E. de Boccard, 1917). I am indebted to Mr. de Boccard for permission to include it in the present volume, and to Mr. Diehl for allowing me to translate the text of the earlier version, with some slight modifications. H. B.

WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS

and settled down to the management of his estates, he looked back upon the adventures and memories of his younger days, his congenital provincialism oozed from him at every pore. The lessons that life had taught him crystallised into sententious maxims, prosy rules of conduct, homely advice backed up by anecdotes — all of which he distributed freely to his household; and I should imagine that in domestic life those who were privileged to see him every day must have found this excellent man, with his heavy good sense, his mediocre mental training, and his endless stories and untiring advice totally devoid of all idealism, at times rather insufferable.

We, who know him less intimately, find him more amusing. It so happens that he wrote for his children a curious little book that has been preserved, in which he sums up all his wisdom and all that he has learnt from experience. It contains advice for every contingency: on morals and on manners, on the administration of property and on the direction of a career, on domestic economy and on social relations. And as this disillusioned, distrustful, sceptical nobleman often displays both humour and the comic spirit, his book casts some unexpected light upon an entire phase of a vanished society. Furthermore, though he in no way prides himself on any literary skill, though he even affects contempt for well-rounded periods, which, he says, "have no merit," though he boasts complacently of his rusticity and his ignorance, the author of this veracious and sincere little book ("I have set down nothing in these pages" he says somewhere, "but the truth — things that I myself have done and seen and learnt") is not with-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

out some points of resemblance to our own La Rochefoucauld. His maxims are, as it were, in the manner of La Rochefoucauld, only less finished — an oriental La Rochefoucauld, feudalised and in the Byzantine style.

I

“Do not decline public office; such positions are the gift of God. But do not forget that your house awaits you when business is over, and that there alone you will find peace.” Our man, as we see, has not an unmixed respect for the beauties of the administration. Although he admits that one must serve the State, he does so from a sense of duty and without excessive enthusiasm. Also, he discriminates carefully. To him the Exchequer as a career is not worth mentioning: it brings one nothing but boredom and the danger of ruin. The Bench and the Civil Services are no less perilous; for those engaged in them are constantly confronted with a difficult problem: from whom is it permissible and necessary to accept money, and to what amount? (Bakhshish in the Orient, we see, is as old as the hills.) Here, with his usual prudence, our author lays down some curious distinctions. If the money comes from an adversary, it may be accepted without qualms, for it has not been given out of love for the recipient. But if you have done a favour to anyone, and he suddenly brings you a present, it is a different matter. “Accept it,” says Cecaumenus, “for by refusing you would offend him. But if the gift is large, do not take it all; keep only half of it.” In general, the wisest course for an official is to accept

WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS

nothing whatever; first, because it is immoral, but chiefly because it is dangerous. In his heart of hearts, he feels that there is only one decent career open to a decent man — namely, the army . . . His was indeed a feudal soul.

But it is the court, above all, that terrifies this provincial gentleman. The apartments of the Imperial Palace are exceeding slippery ground. "If you serve the Emperor," says he, "be very careful; keep the vision of your downfall ever before your eyes — you cannot know all the plots that are woven behind your back." In these circumstances, the utmost prudence must govern one's every move. One must keep a guard upon one's tongue, especially if the conversation is about the Emperor or the Empress. As far as possible, dining out should be avoided, even at the risk of being thought unsociable; for, besides the frivolity and the vain babble of social gatherings, there is always the risk, in the contagious warmth of the banquet, of wrecking one's career by a single word. In short, one must consider every step, remembering that things seemingly of the least importance may be the source of serious annoyance; above all, one must be prudent in dealing with ladies of rank, and not be taken in by their deceptive advances. "As regards the Empress, respect her as your sovereign, as a mother, as a sister; and if she seeks . . . to descend to your level, escape, retire; never speak to her save with lowered eyes." It is evident that our author has known the times when Zoë Porphyrogenita, of scandalous memory, made town and court hum with her notorious adventures, and was an adept in raising by her graciousness

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and cordiality the most obstinately lowered eyes to the contemplation of her charms.

Cecaumenus's political wisdom may be summed up in a few very simple maxims: Serve the Prince faithfully and loyally, as a good vassal should. In the event of rebellion, espouse the cause of the lawful Emperor, at least as much from prudence as from fidelity: "for he who reigns in Constantinople" says he, "invariably wins in the end." There are such folk who are always on the side of the government. But when all is said, it is wisest to live as far as possible from the capital and the court. "If you should feel a desire" says he, "to worship the Imperial Majesty, to prostrate yourself in the holy churches, or to admire the beautiful ordering of the City and of the Palace, go once, but go no more." It is better to live independent and respected upon one's estates than to expose oneself to humiliation and calumny in the imperial household. And in this connexion our author tells an amusing anecdote.

An Arab Emir of the Syrian frontier came to pay a visit to the Roman Emperor. Having been very well received the first time and showered with gifts and honours, he was foolish enough to return. This time he was treated very badly, and kept in Constantinople for two whole years in a sort of quasi-captivity. At last he was released. After crossing the frontier, he gathered all his people together, and, putting both hands to his head, asked them: "What is this?" "Your head, Lord!" they answered, laughing. "God be praised," replied the Emir, "that I have crossed the passes with my head on my shoulders, and am come again into my good land of Arabia!"

WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS

It is better to live on one's estates and keep one's head on one's shoulders, it is better to live in the provinces and "cultivate one's garden", as says *Candide*, than to associate with the intriguing courtiers, the fair temptresses, the proud prelates, and the conceited philosophers whom one meets in the over-civilised, over-refined, over-educated, over-corrupt court circles of Byzantium. And the maxims that Cecaumenus lays down for the ordering of his beloved provincial rustic life are not the least delightful in his little book.

II

"There is no better occupation" says Cecaumenus, "than farming. Grow corn and vines, be a husbandman and a cattle-breeder, and you will be happy." Some may perhaps regard this as an elementary form of happiness; but Cecaumenus found it sufficient for his needs, and appreciated it the more because it was lucrative.

For in such a life, according to this country gentleman, the money question is of perhaps even more essential importance than in the affairs of the government. Doubtless it is right and praiseworthy to be pious and charitable, and not permit one's neighbours to be interfered with; somewhere in his book is the following strongly-worded maxim: "Whoever sees injustice committed and does not protest is truly a devil." But such outbursts are rare. His constant prudence leads him to avoid getting into difficulties, and to keep on the right side of his powerful neighbours by means of timely gifts. The righting of wrongs has but little attraction for his unchiv-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

alric nature; he resembles Sancho Panza rather than Don Quixote.

But the chief effect of his practical good sense is to render him economical, and careful of his resources. Borrowing is to him a very disagreeable business, owing alike to the trouble it entails and to the refusals to which it is exposed; but lending he considers far worse, and he adopts an amusing method of putting his family on their guard against the importunities of beggars. "Beware" says he, "of cunning folk who try" (here I must beg to be excused for using a slang expression; but it renders the Greek to perfection) "to 'touch' you for money. Heed what I say. When a man thinks he can borrow from you he will not ask outright for the money. He will send you some dainties, hares, partridges, fish, and other delicacies; then he will invite you two or three times to dinner, telling you that he esteems you highly. At last, one fine day, he will shew you a large sum of money — which, as a matter of fact, will have been borrowed from another — and will say: 'I had intended to use this money after such and such a manner; but the amount is not sufficient, and I need so much' (naming, of course, the sum he fancies you have available). 'If you love me, lend it me, so that I may proceed with the matter. I will repay you to-morrow or at the end of the week, with a handsome present into the bargain.' Or it may be another story, such as: 'I have the necessary money; but the key of the strong-box has been mislaid'; or perhaps this: 'A friend asked me for some money, and now I myself am in need.' And having cajoled you by these

WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS

smooth words, he will borrow a large sum of you. And while you are thinking only of the dainties you have received, and the good dinners to which he has invited you, and more of which you hope to enjoy, he, having gained his ends, will laugh in his sleeve, saying to himself: 'Blessed be the hares and other gifts that I have sent him, and those good dinners that have fetched me so much gold.' And soon he will begin to keep away from you, will not answer your letters, and will make excuses to escape from you, and if you press him will say to you at last: 'Are you not ashamed to press me so for those badly alloyed and counterfeit coins? If I had known you were that kind of man I should never have accepted anything from you.'" Moral: Kindness is a dangerous virtue; confidence, useless ingenuousness; and the wise man, desirous of peace, should be constantly on his guard, and most of all against his friends.

"What men call friendship" says La Rochefoucauld, "is but a partnership, an interplay of interests, an exchange of favours." And elsewhere he says: "Most friends disgust one with friendship." Cecaumenus is of much the same opinion. "Beware of your friends" says he, "far more than of your enemies." Elsewhere we read: "Many men have ruined themselves through friendship, losing not only their bodies and their goods, but often their very souls." Consequently the wise man will have no friends. "I am willing" says the author, "that you should love all men; but tell none your secrets, for that is most dangerous. From the day that you tell your secrets to any man you become his slave,

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

and he can do you whatever mischief he chooses, while you dare not reply. Why, therefore, should you of your own will surrender your liberty?" Above all, have no intimate friends — they are never sure, and are often troublesome or imprudent —, and on no account admit them into your home. "If" says Cecaumenus, "a passing friend happens along, give him lodging anywhere you choose except in your own house. If you bring him there, your wife, your daughters, and your daughters-in-law, can no longer go forth at will from their apartments and attend to their household duties. Or, if they are obliged to appear, your friend will stare at them, and, while pretending to lower his eyes, will study their appearance, their clothes, and their faces, and, in short, will examine them from head to foot. Need I continue? If he gets the chance, he will make love to your wife, pursue her with his insolent looks, and do his best to seduce her, or at least will boast of having done so."

Here we tread on very delicate ground. Although sceptical in regard to friendship, he is more so in regard to feminine virtue. I do not know whether he, like La Rochefoucauld, ever had dealings with such a woman as M^{me} de Longueville; but, at all events, he held very decided opinions on women, love, and marriage. In his eyes woman is a most formidable creature. "It is dangerous" says he, "to be on bad terms with women, and more dangerous still to be their friend; either condition is fraught with much vexation." In another place we read: "Be very careful when you are talking with a woman, particularly if she is pretty. Do not be too intimate

WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS

with her, for you will not escape her wiles. Soon your eyes will gleam, your heart will beat faster, and you will no longer be master of yourself. You will have to fight three adversaries at once: the Devil, the lady's words and comeliness, and Nature. And Nature is not easily defeated."

So much for women in general; his distrust of his own wife in particular may be imagined. To be sure, he says somewhere: "Who loses his wife loses half his life, if she has been a good one." But he probably thought, like La Rochefoucauld, that, though there may be good marriages, there is nothing attractive in wedlock, and he does not recommend anyone to try it a second time. In his opinion one is never entirely easy in mind with a wife, and she needs to be constantly watched. For one's friends to see her is not prudent, nor is she wholly safe even with servants; and he ends by saying: "Keep your wife and daughters under lock and key like guilty folk, so that you may not fall a victim to the wiles of the serpent." And from the storehouse of his experience Cecaumenus draws a very timely anecdote to point his moral.

A great personage in Constantinople had a charming and pretty wife, fair to look upon, even fairer of character, and intelligent, well-educated, and virtuous. The Emperor made love to her; being unsuccessful, he conceived the idea of sending her husband away in an official capacity to a distant province; the lady still resisted him. On her husband's return to the capital at the end of three years' absence she had not yielded. But at this point a young man appeared on the scene; introducing himself as a

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

relative of the wife's, he soon became a friend of the husband's and had the run of the house . . . "And" adds our author, sententiously, "what the Emperor, with all his promises of money and position had been unable to obtain, friendship succeeded in accomplishing." Of course, such affairs were rare in Cecaumenus's quiet province, and the freer customs of Constantinople had not penetrated at all into those decorous households, whose Christian gynaeceums had much in common with Mohammedan harems. A prudent man, however, regards no precautions as useless. And I should imagine that with a lord and master who kept them so firmly cloistered and never left them, Cecaumenus's wife and daughters must have had but few amusements in the empty idleness of provincial life. Moreover, if we are to judge by what we know of the education of Byzantine women, they could hardly have had many resources within themselves to occupy their time.

Cecaumenus, like the good provincial he was, had many other prejudices. He had no love for physicians, and censures them amusingly; and like Cato, whom he resembles in several respects, he had a whole collection of old wives' remedies, which were more reliable and less expensive. He disliked play-actors, flatterers, parasites, and, in short, all people whom he deemed useless; and his universal distrustfulness is well summed up in this maxim of disillusion: "Human nature is fickle and changeable, and slides easily from good to evil."

The wisdom of this old Byzantine is not very inviting, as we can see; and our great provincial

WISDOM OF CECAUMENUS

landholder — economical, circumspect, shrewd, and sceptical as he was — has nothing of the hero of romance or of the knight-errant in his composition. But such as he is, he is of interest, both from what he teaches us of the vanished world in which he lived, and from the greater knowledge we gain through him of the nature and character of his contemporaries.

Nowadays, when the word Byzantium is mentioned, we think instinctively of marvellous splendour, of extraordinary refinement, and we conjure up, in a setting of magical loveliness, scenes of unheard-of cruelty and excessive corruption and baseness; we think of palace intrigues, street riots, barrack revolutions, and of theological quarrels, and subtle heresies that are meaningless to our lucid Latin minds. We conceive a Byzantium splendid and corrupt, for ever oscillating between two poles, a revolution and a council.

But side by side with the Byzantium of our imaginings there is another that is hardly suspected, but which we must learn of if we would understand how the Empire contrived to exist for so many centuries, not ingloriously. Over against the capital are the provinces. Over against the rottenness of court life are the provincials with their rough, solid virtues — less refined, less elegant, perhaps, but at the same time less corrupt. Over against the paltry minds of courtiers and traitors are the earnest, sober middle classes, the old provincial nobility — countrified, brave, and warlike —, and the sturdy peasantry. From their ranks the administration is recruited, the framework of the edifice of Empire. They com-

BYZANTINE PORTRAITS

posed the army that again and again carried the imperial standards to victory over all the East. We are granted, it is true, but very few glimpses of this other Byzantium; the obscure lives of those who constituted it come only too seldom into the full light of history. Nevertheless, it did exist; and it served as an inexhaustible reservoir of strength for the preservation and glory of the Byzantine Empire, and of Constantinople, its dazzling crown. The Byzantine epic rightly honours those great feudal barons who, on distant frontiers — in the Taurus, or on the banks of the Euphrates — waged untiringly for centuries fierce war against the infidel. Cecaumenus's prosaic wisdom shews them in a different light, as they actually were, less knightly perhaps, but no less interesting, and much truer to life.

Distant and forgotten as all these things may seem, they have more vitality in them than we might at first imagine. In the sanguinary events that every century — our own among them — has witnessed in the Balkan peninsula, Byzantium is ever the ultimate goal, and her mighty influence dominates the strenuous rivalry of those who proclaim themselves her avengers or her heirs. Around St. Sophia's Byzantine dome whirls a multitude of high hopes and splendid dreams. For all the ambitions that centre on the Bosphorus Byzantine history provides the sanctions. And therefore this dead history comes unexpectedly to take its place among the realities of today; for it bears within itself some of those dominant ideas that often give the impetus to great events.

THE
SACRED PALACE

THE PLAN OF THE SACRED PALACE

The Plan of the Sacred Palace is from Jean Ebersolt: *Le Grand Palais de Constantinople et le livre des Cérémonies* (Ernest Leroux, 1910). The Translator and the Publisher are very grateful to M^r. Leroux for permission to reproduce it.

It should be observed that this plan is based entirely upon literary evidence. M^r. Ebersolt's chief source is the *Ceremonies*, edited by Constantine VII, a compilation of minute accounts, from widely varying periods, of the official ritual that enveloped the daily life of the Emperor and his court. By determining so far as possible the chronological sequence of these texts M^r. Ebersolt has been able to draw up a plan which is doubtless, as he himself points out, only tentative. But as excavation is out of the question, since a large part of the site is occupied by the vast Mosque of Sultan Ahmed and its dependencies, his reconstruction is likely to hold the field for many years to come.

In the accompanying Key the names of buildings, apartments, etc., to which reference is made in *Byzantine Portraits*, are printed in italic.

H.B

KEY

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1 <i>Augustaeum</i> | 13 Triclinium of the Candidati |
| 2 Golden Milestone | 14 Oaton (Trullus) |
| 3 Baths of Zeuxippus | a. Sacella |
| 4 Numera | 15 Consistory |
| 5 <i>Senale-house</i> | β. Lesser Consistory |
| 6 <i>Palace of Magnaura</i> | 16 <i>Triclinium of the Nineteen</i> |
| 7 <i>Chalce</i> | <i>Couches</i> |
| 8 Quarters of the Scholarian Guards: | 17 Church of Our Lord |
| I-VII Barracks | 18 Onopodion |
| VIII Stables for mules | 19 <i>Palace of Daphne:</i> |
| IX Triclinium of the Scholae | a) <i>Triclinium of the Augustaeum</i> |
| X <i>Church of the Holy Apostles</i> | b) Octagon |
| 9 Gate of the Excubitors | c) Winding staircase |
| 10 Tribunal | d) <i>Church of St. Stephen</i> |
| 11 Lychni | e) Oratories |
| 12 Triclinium of the Excubitors | f) Gallery |
| | 20 Stables |
| | 21 Scyla |

PLAN OF THE SACRED PALACE

- | | |
|---|---|
| 22 Gallery of Justinian II | II Diaetarikion |
| 23 Gallery of Marcian | III Pantheon |
| 24 Church of St. Peter and Oratory of the Archistrategus | IV Phylax |
| 25 Church of the Virgin | V Oratory of St. Theodore |
| 26 Oratory of SS. Paul and Barbara | VI <i>Empress's Apartments</i> |
| 27 Pentacubiculum of St. Paul | VII <i>Emperor's Apartments</i> |
| 28 Apse | VIII Dining-room |
| 29 Baths and Building erected by Theoctistus | IX <i>New Palace of Basil I</i> |
| 30 Thermastra | X Gallery |
| 31 Passages adjoining the Church of Our Lord | 36 Terrace |
| 32 Triconchus: | 37 Church of St. Demetrius |
| <i>A</i> Sigma | 38 Church of the Virgin by the Lighthouse |
| <i>B</i> Phiale | 39 Church of St. Elias |
| <i>C</i> Pyxitis and Triclinium | 40 Oratory of St. Clement |
| <i>D</i> <i>Pavilion of Love</i> | 41 Oratory of the Saviour |
| <i>E</i> <i>Carian Pavilion</i> | 42 <i>Lighthouse</i> |
| <i>F</i> <i>Pearl Pavilion</i> | 43 Gallery connecting Lighthouse with New Church |
| <i>G</i> <i>Pavilion of Camilas</i> | 44 <i>New Church</i> |
| <i>H</i> <i>Second Cubiculum</i> | 45 <i>Palace Hippodrome</i> |
| <i>I</i> <i>Pavilion of Harmony</i> | 46 Treasury of New Church |
| <i>J</i> <i>Fourth Cubiculum</i> | 47 Administration of New Church |
| <i>K</i> <i>Empress's Bedchamber</i> | 48 Treasury |
| <i>LL</i> Buildings adjoining K | 49 Wardrobe |
| <i>M</i> <i>Triclinium with four rooms</i> | 50 Oratory of St. John Evangelist |
| 33 <i>Gallery of Lausiacus</i> | 51 <i>Pavilion of the Eagle and Ora- tory of the Virgin</i> |
| 34 Passages of the Forty Saints | 52 <i>Pyramidal Apartments and Oratory of the Virgin</i> |
| 35 <i>Golden Triclinium</i> | 53 Baths |
| I <i>Tripeton</i> | |

A NOTE ON THE TYPE
IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

This book has been set, on the Monotype, in Cochin, which was adapted from the type cut by G. Peignot et Fils, Paris. It is the result of an effort to reproduce the work of the French eighteenth century copperplate engravers; not a copy of the design of any particular foundry but evolved after careful study of the faces of that period. In plan it is not strictly old style but possesses a number of modern characteristics, and can well be called a twentieth century letter adapted from an eighteenth century model.



SET UP, ELECTROTYPED, PRINTED AND
BOUND BY THE PLIMPTON PRESS,
NORWOOD, MASS. · PAPER MANU-
FACTURED BY W. C. HAMILTON
& SONS, MIQUON, PA. AND
FURNISHED BY W. F. ETH-
ERINGTON & CO.,
NEW YORK



1219
504

